

*An Unwanted
Bride for the
Suspicious Rancher*
**FELICITY
WELLS**

An Unwanted Bride for the Suspicious Rancher

A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel

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Chapter 1

Copyright

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1881 – Rochester, New York

People hurried through the busy streets of New York, clutching their bags a bit tighter to safeguard their money from pickpockets, their jackets preventing the winter cold from penetrating their skin.

They didn't mind the constant smell of urine and trash. Instead, their eyes glowed with anticipation—it was six p.m., after all, and the close of the workday. Soon, they would be home or at the saloons to forget their never-ending busyness.

But somewhere in Rochester, one pair of eyes among the throng of workers stared straight ahead. Those eyes weren't filled with anticipation, neither did they look relieved at no longer having to squint to pass the thread through the eye of the needle all day long.

Instead, this stare was vacant, empty, and without soul. It was as if someone had recently snatched the owner of the eyes, Rachel McAllister, and taken away every reason she had to be happy.

As her legs dragged her home from work, she watched everything happening around her without really seeing it.

It had been a long winter. The snow had finally started to thaw on the sidewalks and street corners. Instead of heavy snowstorms, they got sleet and light flurries.

New York was tiring enough without the dreariness of winter hanging over the city; somehow, it made everything worse. So, it was no surprise that with the change in weather indicating that spring would soon arrive, anticipation hung in the air.

Nevertheless, Rachel couldn't bring herself to muster up the slightest enthusiasm for the upcoming season. She didn't have the usual feelings of delight.

Not when the death of her mother, Lily McAllister, lay heavily on her mind like a cold, wet blanket. It was as if the joy had been sucked out of her life with her mother's last breath.

Even when she'd been sick for several months with tuberculosis, Lily had been like a warm, cheery candle in her daughter's otherwise grim existence.

But she had passed on. Her light was snuffed out, leaving Rachel alone in the darkness.

When she finally got to the boarding house she now called home, Rachel went around to the back and through the servants' entrance, climbing up the stairs and walking down a narrow passage until she got to a door.

She quickly unlocked it and walked into a small room that could hardly pass for a living space.

It had been built for the boarding-house maids, but after their family's turn in fortune, her former nanny, Mrs. Fowler, had helped them secure the room for a minimal sum.

Rachel had been grateful; the room was better than the accommodations they'd seen all over New York.

The boarding house had been something Lily had insisted on in an attempt to hold onto her former life and hide them from the shame of poverty.

They could barely afford the rent as their wages had hardly been enough to feed and clothe them, but her mother had stubbornly remained to hold onto her last shred of dignity.

Rachel didn't blame her for wanting that last piece of comfort.

Despite that, the position of her room meant central heating wasn't enough to keep her warm. The heating ensured whoever was in the room didn't freeze to death on cold nights, but that was the limit.

Rachel took off her coat and hung it up—it was a good, sturdy coat she'd gotten on sale, and she intended to get the most use out of it. She kept her gloves on, though.

She sat on a squeaky, dilapidated sofa in the room whose only other possessions were her mother's sack, her sack, and a small mattress.

Just a few weeks ago, the only other furniture it had ever seen were a table, chair, and sewing machine. Rachel had never used them because she could hardly sew after Louis Landal, the garment sweatshop she worked at, sucked up all of her time.

She'd sold them in a desperate attempt to get money to buy medicine for her sick mother, but that had been to no avail. Lily had still died a few days ago from tuberculosis, snatching a part of Rachel along with her as she'd left this world.

Since then, Rachel had slept and sat on the sofa, unable to get herself to sleep on the same bed as her mother had. Unable to eat anything more than bland bread, or do anything except the barest minimum tasks.

It was sad how she now considered this servants' room as a comfortable living arrangement. Once upon a time, they'd lived in a much better house with three bedrooms: her parents' room, Rachel's room, and a guest bedroom.

Lily didn't need to work then, and she hadn't. She'd spent most days

caring for her only child.

“Mother,” Rachel muttered with a pain-laced voice as she recalled their former life and what Lily did on nights like this, when winter would soon end and give way to spring.

They always sat in front of the fireplace. Lily had drawn little Rachel close and told her stories in a pleasant tone.

They weren’t fairytales or bedtime stories; she’d never bothered with those. She had instead told Rachel about her father Steven’s voyages on the sea.

They were stories of his adventures, quests with pirates involving hair-raising escapades. In them, Steven was a brave merchant that fate rewarded for being fair in his business dealings.

He was a hero to Rachel, who always wished he was there by the warm fireplace.

During those evenings, Rachel had snuggled close to her mother and held her in as much of an embrace as her tiny arms could manage. She’d clung to Lily that way until her eyes closed in contentment and she fell asleep.

But things had changed when she grew up, hadn’t they? Her pa had lost his goods at sea, wallowed in debt, and traveled to Texas, never to be seen or heard from again.

They’d lost their fortune, and their friends and Steven’s family had deserted them. Then, Rachel and her mother had needed to move out of the house, find work, and barely survive.

Years later, Lily had fallen ill with tuberculosis and died after several months of sickness, leaving Rachel with no family.

That was the summary of her miserable life.

Tears ran down Rachel's cheeks as she rocked back and forth on the chair, memory after memory rushing through her mind. She sat through the night in that manner, crying, until she finally fell into a troubled sleep.



Rachel woke up with a start. It was daybreak, and she hardly had enough time to get to work. She tucked away her grief and started getting dressed; Louis Landal's management didn't tolerate absenteeism.

When she finally got to work, she was late again. The factory hall was already filled with workers, except for a few seats.

Her section had lines of sewing machine operators hunched over while they sewed and tried to meet their quota for the day.

With her face assuming an air of nonchalance and her heart pounding in her chest, Rachel hurried to her seat before anyone could notice her. She'd been late too many times; people had been dismissed from work for far less than this.

She flopped down on her seat beside her colleague and best friend Charlotte, threaded the machine's needle, and lined up a cloth to sew. Just then, a masculine hand grabbed the material.

"Rachel."

She looked up to see the frown firmly planted on her supervisor Eric's face. His fingers tapped on the cloth as if to demand an explanation for her lateness.

What could she say? *I'm late because my mother just died and I've been grieving?*

It was a valid excuse, but saying that to her supervisor would result in a compulsory leave without pay. And she needed money for her

mother's funeral.

She'd spent all her savings on a lovely little plot, somewhere her mother could rest peacefully without someone digging up her grave years later to make space for another. Now she needed to put money aside for flowers.

She'd been surprised to discover how expensive lovely flowers were, but she was determined that her mother would have them. Lily had loved flowers when she was alive.

In the old house, she'd always made sure there were fresh bouquets in several rooms. She had kept a garden, too, growing bee balm, lily-of-the-valley, and black-eyed Susan.

Rachel had resolved that her mother would have her flowers even if it meant she had to work until her fingers bled.

But if Eric sympathized with her and let her come late, the factory manager still wouldn't. He gave the sewing machine operators ten garments each to sew daily from Monday to Saturday.

He paid them only for the number of clothes they'd completed, and if anyone failed to meet their weekly quota thrice, he fired them.

Rachel had turned in only five days' worth of work the past few weeks because her mother's sickness had intensified. Charlotte had helped her to sew a few jackets, but that couldn't have been enough. Somehow, Eric must have been covering for her.

His finger quickly brushed against her hand. It was light, almost unnoticeable.

It should have made her hand tingle and her heart leap with anticipation, but it did nothing. She still felt as cold as the New York winter.

Eric cleared his throat.

"Rachel," he said in a loud voice, "I want to see you right now."

His words were what made her heart pound. He'd used the tone reserved for warning detractors, latecomers, and employees who slacked in their duties.

Would he issue her a warning and let her go, or would she lose her job?

She followed him across the big hall and into the coatroom, where they were alone.

Eric regarded her calmly. "You're late again, Rachel. What has been the problem? Your behavior has been different the past few weeks."

Rachel chewed her lips, not speaking. She couldn't tell him about her personal life. After the friends she'd had when her family was well-to-do had deserted her, she'd found it difficult to open up to people.

Lily had died two days ago, and Rachel hadn't even told Charlotte yet. How then could she tell Eric, whom she had no feelings for, what was going on?

"Charlotte has refused to explain the reason for your sudden sloppiness, lateness, and general change in behavior." He paused and ran his hands through his hair.

He moved closer. The gesture was intimate, and it suffocated Rachel.

"If we're ever going to make anything out of... If we court and... You have to be open to me."

Rachel sighed in the way of someone who bore the weight of the world on her shoulders. She moved back, uncomfortable with Eric's closeness.

When her back was pressed to the clothes hanging by the wall, she stopped.

She didn't want that familiarity between her and Eric. Not that he wasn't a good man.

He was a kind supervisor who cared about those working under him. He was firm yet fair in all his dealings.

But when he'd started showing interest in her, Rachel had been unable to reciprocate.

She couldn't muster any feelings for him no matter how hard she tried. Although he was dashing and had a smile that made many ladies swoon, she didn't see him as a future husband. He was a tad too serious, his mannerisms were too city-like, and he lived in New York.

Rachel had always longed for a complete family. It had started when Steven would travel for weeks then come back to stay only for a few days before embarking on another journey.

She'd wanted her father to be by her side, but she had made do with her mother's stories, letting each word comfort her and envelop her in love.

When Steven traveled to Texas and never came back, the longing had deepened. Now that her mother had passed on, Rachel felt like she was all alone in the world with no family, no one to go home to.

Eric would have been a suitable husband if she had any attraction for him, but a life of getting married to him and working in the garment sweatshop seemed bleak.

Still, she wondered if she should settle for it. It was better than going home to the little room to endure the cold, lonely nights.

Eric tapped her on the shoulder, bringing her out of her thoughts. She looked blankly at him; she hadn't been listening.

"Have you considered my proposal?" he asked softly.

"I'm still considering it," she answered, and he frowned slightly.

"I'll give you a definite answer next week," she added quickly to encourage him and prepared to leave. She didn't want to spoil her chances with Eric even though she cringed at the thought of being married to him.

When Rachel finally got back to the factory hall and sat by her sewing machine, Charlotte turned to her with eager eyes, her brown curly hair bouncing up and down as she talked animatedly.

"What did he say? I talked to him earlier. I told him to be kind to you," she said eagerly. "I hope he didn't threaten to suspend you or anything worse."

Rachel started sewing, staring blankly at the material. She wasn't in the mood for light gossip.

"He was kind," she said.

"Rachel," Charlotte said, "what's wrong? You've barely spoken the past few days."

Rachel shook her head and continued sewing.

"I'm not going to take no for an answer this time around. Just tell me what's wrong, and I'll help you through it."

Tears filled Rachel's eyes at the memory of coming home that day and seeing Lily's lifeless body. She blinked them back rapidly. "My mother is dead. She died on Monday."

Charlotte swiftly moved closer and held her hands.

"That's so sad to hear. Sorry, Rachel. If I'd known, I would have come and stayed with you. Should I come tonight?" she said, wiping the tears from Rachel's eyes.

"I'll be fine," Rachel replied, shaking her head. *I hope I'll be fine.*

"You can take a day off, you know. The management will understand."

Rachel shook her head vigorously; she needed the money. "I'll be fine," she repeated. "I'll be fine even though I don't have a family anymore," she muttered.

"You do, Rachel. You have me." Rachel opened her mouth to speak, but Charlotte continued, "Besides, you can get married to a fine gentleman who you love and who loves you.

"Then you'll have a family filled with love, peace, and satisfaction; it's the most important way to be a family."

Rachel closed her eyes and nodded. She'd always wanted to live in a cottage by the countryside with her husband, her children laughing and playing in the open fields as they breathed the fresh country air.

She could already see it in her mind; it was a family filled with happiness and love.

The image gave her renewed focus and she began to work, but as the day wore on and she found it difficult to meet her quota, she put the daydream aside and settled for the reality of her situation.

She'd spent all her savings on her mother's sickness and had to work even in her mother's death to make enough money for the funeral expenses. She didn't have any family or any other person to go to except her maternal aunt, whom she hadn't heard from in a while.

At this point, a life in the country with her family was only a dream, wishful thinking.

Life with Eric sounded like a more realistic alternative. If he courted her and they married, she would at least have a husband and children by her side.

But the thought of her and Eric didn't make Rachel smile. It only brought more sadness into her already bleak situation.

Fort Worth, Texas

“S*hould I carry the hay?” little Daniel Hickman asked, trying*

with all his might to lift the pile of hay in the barn.

His father watched him with an amused expression. “No, Daniel. Just take that broken piece over there.”

“But I’m as strong as you, Father, and I can carry as much hay as I want.”

A deep, throaty laugh erupted from his pa. “Sure, son. You’re as strong as I am, but sometimes that sort of strong takes time to show.”

Little Daniel frowned. “If the hay doesn’t want to be carried, then I’m going to do something else. Maybe the horses will want me to feed them. I’ll give Daisy an apple.”

With that, he ran off, singing at the top of his lungs. “Daisy, Daisy, where are you?”

As he tied the hay into tight, square bales and stacked them, older Daniel smiled at the memory. He’d been happy working on his father’s farm as a child.

Although he had ended up scattering instead of gathering, breaking more eggs than he picked, and feeding the horses too many apples and sweet food, his parents had patiently taught him and let him have all

the fun in the world.

He hadn't even considered working on the farm a chore when he was younger; it had been a chance to explore and learn new things.

He remembered when his mother had marked a section of the land for him to start his own little farm. He'd grown potatoes, flowers, and anything that came to his mind.

He'd even once decided to grow grasses. His mother had responded with a firm no and had told him what was allowed to grow on a farm and what was not.

He recalled the time they'd gone to the park for a picnic. His mother had made sausages and eggs with pancakes, his favorite food as a youngster.

She'd served them to Daniel and his older sister, Rose. They'd happily eaten before trying to feed the pigeons and birds crumbs of bread.

After running around the park for a while, Daniel had returned to see his parents in a passionate embrace. Then, his mother had rested her head on his father's shoulder and closed her eyes, her lips turning upward into a blissful smile.

That was the picture that always came to his mind now that his parents had passed on. Even after they'd died in a scorching fire when he was twelve, he could only see them as happy as they'd been on that picnic day.

At twenty-six, he still missed his family. He especially missed what they'd had—happiness, joy, love, bliss, togetherness. All of that had been taken from him too soon.

It wasn't the same with Uncle Travis, who'd brought him to Hickman Ranch after the fire but only provided for his physical needs.

He'd sold his brother's farmland, become less social, and kept Daniel

at arm's length, only teaching him what he needed to know about the ranch and never giving him the kind of affection Daniel's pa had.

Daniel didn't blame his uncle for his action. The woman he'd loved had died in the fire, and the man had never recovered from it. He hadn't married or even attempted to court any lady since then.

Daniel hoped to marry someday and have children, to feel that happiness that had always coursed through him as a little boy.

As he thought about the kind of family he wanted, he felt a strong desire rising within him.

When he and Silas, his uncle's ranch hand, had tied the last hay, he stepped back and surveyed his work with satisfaction. The pile of hay had dwindled during winter, so there wasn't much left.

Luckily, there had been no snowfall in Fort Worth this winter. There had been enough bluegrass to feed the animals and the hay only supplemented their diet.

However, he would need to go into town the next day to purchase more. Thankfully, the winter season was drawing to a close. Soon, the price of hay would reduce.

For now, he'd buy just enough to last them for two months. Then, when he could get a better bargain, he would buy in bulk.

He breathed in deeply, and the smell of the hay awakened another memory. He'd been eleven or maybe ten.

Whenever his uncle had gone out to purchase hay, Daniel joined him and lay in the wagon on the way back, stretching out on the firmly packed produce.

He'd loved being surrounded by the dry, nutty-smelling hay, the way the leaves in the bales brushed across his skin as the wagon creaked on the way home.

He had stared up into the wide blue sky, thinking about how good life was. That had been his favorite chore in the world.

"You're so quiet today," Silas said. "Care to share what's on your mind?"

Daniel considered the man briefly. Silas was a ranch hand from the state of Louisiana. He'd been employed six months ago and had taken a special liking to Daniel. Daniel liked the way the younger man carried himself with a maturity that was beyond his years.

"I was thinking about my parents and sister. I lost them a long time ago, but we were so happy. I used to fly a kite on the streets and the farm." He smiled a little.

"Every time I remember them now, I think about having my own family with a beautiful woman and lots of children. I want to experience that kind of happiness again. I would love to find a wife who will live happily with me and be ready to have and take care of children."

He felt slightly self-conscious as he spoke. He'd not meant to say all this to Silas, but the man was a good listener, and Daniel felt comfortable talking to him.

Silas chuckled. "You never need to worry about that. I'm sure several ladies in town would be willing to start a family with you if you decided to court them.

"If that's what you want, you should go for it—find a wife, settle down, and have a brood of kids. You only need to ask her first."

But Daniel had never asked to court a woman. Growing up, courtship had never been his primary concern. Presently, he just didn't have the time.

He was in charge of running the ranch while his uncle only supervised him. Working day to night every day of the week took all his energy

away. He only ever went out to buy goods or supply them.

The one lady he'd met and liked while conducting business was Jessica. He hadn't summoned the courage to talk to her because his uncle was opposed to the idea of marriage.

Eventually, she'd gone off and married another farmer in a nearby town.

Travis didn't trust women, not when his betrothed had mistakenly started the fire that had killed her and Daniel's family. He constantly warned his nephew about the dangers of getting married.

"Such actions," he insisted, "can cause more damage than good. You can lose your home, business, or your family. I don't want that for you, Daniel."

Daniel had always listened to what his uncle said. Even now, he could admit that somewhere in the depths of his mind, he had the same belief as Travis.

Depending on a woman to assist you with ranch work wasn't a good idea; he and Uncle Travis had learned that lesson the hard way.

"Haven't you ever asked to court one of the ladies in town?" Silas asked him.

"No," he replied.

"Well, you can get a wife without having to ask face to face. That's how I got my sweet Julia. If you're shy, you can still find a nice woman to marry you."

Daniel wasn't shy by any standards. He always talked to women; he just couldn't bring himself to court them. But now that Silas spoke about getting a wife without having to court them face to face, Daniel turned to him.

“How?”

Silas hesitated, then reached into the pocket of his shirt and brought out a folded-up letter and a picture. "Here," he beckoned.

Daniel stepped closer. He could just make out the name 'Julia' scrawled at the end of the letter. In the picture, a raven-haired woman with smiling green eyes stared down lovingly at a baby swaddled in a blanket.

He wondered what it would feel like to touch his own baby's soft hands and hear the child's laughter and first words.

"That's my wife and my son. She was pregnant when I left. She sent me a picture of herself and my son when he was born," Silas explained.

"She's beautiful," Daniel said, his voice rough with emotion.

"My problem wasn't that I didn't trust women. I was just too shy around them. I can express my feelings better on paper, but you can't take a girl out to the fair just to pass her letters all day, can you?

“So, I put in an advertisement for a mail-order bride. After some time, Julia replied and we started a correspondence.”

Silas smiled. “It took a while before I knew she was the right woman for me. While we were exchanging letters, another woman answered and I thought of giving her a try. I even sent her a letter.

“Then one day, I was reading Julia's letter and everything slid into place with a click. She was the one. I sent a letter to the other lady apologizing for wasting her time,” he said. “A year later, Julia and I were married.”

Daniel had seen the mail-order bride advertisements in the newspapers and heard about a few men who got married in that way. But seeing someone who was so happily married to such a woman

assured him that it could work if he went the same route.

He'd seen Silas glow with pride as he talked about his family. The man obviously adored his wife. Daniel wondered if he would ever find that for himself.

"Anyway, that's what you should do," Silas said, folding the letter carefully and placing it and the picture back into his pocket.

"Place an advertisement in a newspaper. That way, any girl who answers knows exactly what she's up for and can come prepared. You can also learn all you need to know about the lady before asking her to come out West.

"You've not been able to find a wife in Fort Worth, but the woman meant for you may be somewhere out in Boston for all you know. There's no harm in looking."

Daniel nodded.

The mail-order bride affair seemed reasonable to him. He could find a lady who suited him just fine from another state. And if the lady left her old life to come live with him, it would mean she was committed to being his wife.

It was a good idea. He would place an advert later in the day.

As Daniel went about his task, he wondered what he would write.

A young man in Texas is looking for a lady between twenty and twenty-five...

No, that wouldn't do. He needed to pour out his heart on paper, so the right woman for him would recognize how right he could be for her once she read his words.

Maybe he would place an advertisement that said:

Hello,

I'm Daniel; a kind, caring, and loving man. I've always wanted to have a family, but...

Rachel buried her mother on a cold Sunday evening.

It was a quiet funeral, and her tears didn't stop falling throughout the day. The service was held in a small chapel her mother had loved to attend before she'd fallen so terribly ill.

Charlotte was one of the first people to arrive, and all through the service, she was a pillar of support for her friend. Some ladies Lily had known from church and some people who lived at the boarding house were there.

Rachel saw some heavily veiled women slip in and out halfway through the service. They were probably some of her mother's old friends from before they'd become poor.

She wondered if Lily's former friends felt guilty for not coming to their aid all these years. Perhaps they felt only relief—now that her mother was gone, there was nothing they could do to help her, so they could close that chapter in their lives and move on.

She wanted to run over to them, grab them, shake them, and ask why they'd turned their backs on her family, but she knew her mother wouldn't want that.

Lily had been a peaceful woman. No doubt, she would want decorum at her funeral.

When the service was over, the hearse carried the plain white casket

decorated with flowers to the cemetery. Rachel watched while her mother was lowered into the ground.

She sobbed freely then, holding on to Charlotte for support.

After the funeral, she went home on her own, declining her friend's repeated offers to accommodate her for a few days. Rachel needed to grieve alone; Charlotte's concern would only make her withdraw and shut her out.

Besides, she'd made a decision and was finally taking some action. She had sent letters to her mother's sister and her father, but she hadn't received a reply.

She wasn't too concerned; she would proceed with her plans with or without them.

She had decided to leave New York; she'd stayed in the town mostly for her mother. Now that Lily was dead and buried, there was no need for Rachel to remain.

The city held nothing for her but sadness, bad memories, and the prospect of a life spent toiling in the garment sweatshop. She couldn't live like that.

The next morning, she picked up a newspaper at the stand a few yards from her workplace. She hadn't purchased one in a while—grief had stolen her ability to find joy in the little things of life.

Even now, she wasn't reading it for pleasure. She wanted to go through it and search for interesting job openings that might catch her attention so she could have an idea of where to go.

Before she bought it, she saw a catalog of mail-order bride advertisements next to where the newspaper had been. She put it on top of the newspaper and paid for it quickly, then tucked it into her coat as if she was doing something illegal.

She left them in her coat pocket when she hung it up at work and resolved not to give the catalog any more thought. Despite this, her mind strayed to the adverts once or twice as her hands sewed jacket after jacket.

It was true that she wanted a family, but she'd never really considered being a mail-order bride. What had she been thinking, buying that catalog?



Rachel left work very late that day. It was dark, and most of the workers had gone by the time she stepped out of the Louis Landal building.

She went home and heated up a glass of milk in the boarding house kitchen, hoping the warmth from the beverage would help her rest. She'd been finding it hard to sleep ever since her mother passed on.

Then she sat down on the sofa and began to flip through the catalog. The first few advertisements read:

Wife between the age of eighteen and twenty-one wanted for a young, strong, Californian farmer in his 30s.

Missouri bachelor of 45 with good appearance wishes to meet an elderly maid or widow. Object: matrimony.

A good-looking young man in Kansas wishes to correspond with a beautiful young lady. Object: quality time and its results.

Her eyes skimmed through the pages, considering and discarding the adverts she read. She fit more than a few descriptions of the kind of woman the men wanted. Most of them weren't picky; they just wanted good wives to bear children and provide some company.

But Rachel wanted something more.

She was about to close the catalog when an advertisement caught her attention. It was much longer than the others, as if the man had bought up three or more advert spaces:

I'm D—a kind, caring, loving, strong, and able-bodied man who was born and reared under Southern skies. I've always wanted a family because I lost my parents years ago, and now, I would like to build my family.

I desire to correspond with a woman who seeks love and family above all else. She should be hardworking, ready to get her hands dirty on a ranch, and loving.

Object: matrimony. Address: Box 278, Fort Worth, Texas.

The advertisement called to a special place in her heart. She read it over and over again, analyzing it.

D lived on a ranch, and ranches had fields with more than enough space for children to run and play. He had lost his parents; she'd also lost hers.

He was willing to love, to build a family. She could almost hear the longing in his words as if it was something he craved deeply, just like she did.

She didn't want to hope, but her heart fluttered with excitement anyway.

Here was a man, all the way in the country just like she wanted, looking for a wife to start a family with. A family that he'd yearned after for so long.

As Rachel reread the advertisement one last time, she could hear the words he wrote as if he whispered them softly into her ears. His advertisement was personal, so he cared about the kind of woman who would become his wife.

They wanted the same thing, had the same kind of aspirations. What

more could she say? D was a perfect match for her, a match brought together by heaven.

Just then, something else caught her attention—*Fort Worth, Texas*.

Her pa had embarked on a journey to Texas and never contacted them again.

She'd told herself she wouldn't recall the events that led to his abandoning his daughter and his wife. She had buried the memory, forced herself not to think about it.

But now that she had decided to correspond with D from Fort Worth, Texas, and would likely get married to the rancher, the memory of her family's demise ran through Rachel's mind. She was unable to stop it.

It was barely six years ago. She'd been fifteen.

By then, she had understood the true meaning of her mother's stories. Her pa hadn't come from wealth or been handed a family business so he could continue their legacy.

Steven McAllister had been a successful merchant because he'd built his wealth through hard work and sheer grit.

They'd lived on a street where almost every resident was richer than them.

Rachel knew that because even though the porches, roofs, chimneys, and walls of every house in the street looked the same, inside was vastly different. Their furniture and decorations weren't as good or expensive as those of their neighbors.

At that time, Rachel had had two friends—Veronica and Becky. Veronica was seventeen, while Becky was sixteen.

"I'm going to marry a well-to-do man in government or a wealthy businessman," Veronica had been saying on that fateful day.

They were in Rachel's house talking about an upcoming party they would attend in a few days.

"What do you want, Rachel? What kind of gentleman do you want to get married to?"

"I just want to live in the countryside with a husband who will always be around."

Veronica scoffed and began, in her signature haughty voice, "My mother said the best advice she would give to any lady is to marry a man and have friends above her station."

Just then, they all heard the voice that damned Rachel's future; it filtered clearly into the room: "I have been patient. Pay off the debt within a month, or else I'll take your property."

Rachel had gone pale at the threat.

Later, she'd learned that the voice had belonged to one of the creditors. Her father had lost two shipments at sea a few months back.

He'd borrowed to offset the costs and finance the next trip. Since then, he had slowly sunk further into debt with each load of cargo that didn't break even.

For the last trio, he'd borrowed heavily. He'd had faith in that shipment and had believed it would finally set him on the course to solvency.

But there had been a storm. The ship had sunk, taking his hopes and dreams for a better future with it.

Steven had traveled to Texas the next day, hoping to find some quick fortune and save his family from penury. He hadn't been around to witness the creditors sending his wife and daughter off their property, leaving them on the streets with only their boxes of clothes.

Lily had begged several people to accommodate them for a few weeks—her husband's family, friends, Veronica and Becky's mothers. None of them had listened.

That day, Rachel had tasted the bitterness of betrayal. Veronica had had the effrontery to turn her nose up at her and say, "You're poor now. We can't help you."

They had stayed out on the street till nightfall. Even though they'd lived uptown in a secure location, she had been afraid they would be robbed.

Eventually, when it seemed they had no choice but to sleep on the street, Mrs. Fowler came to their aid.

She'd taken them to her house downtown and accommodated them for a few days. Then, she'd helped them to rent the boarding house room with the little money Lily had saved in one of her boxes.

But the sting of Veronica's words had never left Rachel. She'd sent letter upon letter, begging her father to come back and recover his house.

She didn't get one reply.

Replying to the mail-order bride advertisement from Texas would mean having the chance to meet her father again, but the thought made resentment build up in Rachel.

She didn't think she would be welcoming him with open arms anytime soon. She only knew one thing—she would find the answer to all the questions she had.

Did Steven really care about her? Had some misfortune befallen him? What would happen if she found out he had another family?

But surely he wouldn't do that. He wouldn't abandon his wife and daughter and forget them just like that, would he?

Rachel pushed aside the dreadful thoughts. They made her want to stay in New York and agree to Eric's proposal.

But her intuition told her that he wasn't the right man for her. Besides, she didn't love him. It wasn't fair to her kind supervisor for Rachel to pretend to love him.

With that, she decided to tell Eric the truth the following day.

She hoped he wouldn't be heartbroken. It was better that he found a good lady who loved him than to be with a woman who felt no iota of love toward him.

She thought about all of this into the night and woke up at daybreak. As she rushed into Louis Landal, late again, she felt lighthearted even though she knew trouble was brewing because of her incessant tardiness.

Just before she walked up to the coatroom, she heard a giggle that sounded so much like Charlotte's. She stopped.

"Rachel is going through a rough spot. Since her mother fell ill, she has been unable to work as well as she used to."

"Well, the manager wants her gone. I can't keep making excuses for her. He also wants to fire you because he thinks you've not been meeting your quota. But we all know the truth: you've been sewing jackets for her."

That was Eric's voice; it sounded angry and accusatory.

"That's what friends do for each other," Charlotte replied defensively. "Her mother fell sick, and she just died. If I don't help Rachel, who will?"

"That's what I like about you. You care about your friend so much..."

Rachel walked briskly into the coatroom. While her friend wasn't

badmouthing her, she didn't like people discussing her misfortune.

She'd told Charlotte not to tell anyone about her mother's predicament, but she should have known that her friend wouldn't be able to keep her mouth shut. Charlotte was a chatterbox; it was only a matter of time before she disclosed Rachel's personal life to someone.

On getting inside, what she saw made her pause. Eric held Charlotte's arm while she looked up at him adoringly. They were a hair's breadth away from each other, almost in an embrace.

But their position didn't elicit any emotion from Rachel. Suddenly, the meaning of certain events that hadn't made so much sense became clearer to her.

She understood why her friend was constantly speaking to the supervisor about her.

As soon as Charlotte saw her, she jumped away from Eric. "Rachel, I... I was just explaining to Eric that you'll soon start coming to work early."

"You were?" Rachel asked, looking between her and Eric, who was silently watching back.

"Nothing happened, nothing is happening between us. I was begging him to plead with the management to give you some more time.

"I told him you'd soon start coming in early," she said, then hurried out of the room.

As she watched Charlotte leave, Rachel was glad she'd never truly considered Eric. Her friend was obviously besotted with him.

Rachel wondered why she hadn't noticed Charlotte's eagerness to always talk about Eric, her coyness when he spoke to the both of them, and how she always sought him out to have a conversation. Maybe she had been too overwhelmed by her mother's sickness.

Right there, she saw an easy way out of her desire not to be with Eric. If Charlotte and Eric really loved each other, it would be better for them to be together.

But her friend was an extremely loyal person who wouldn't show interest in Eric if she ever thought Rachel was displeased about their getting together. She'd been blind to Charlotte's feelings, and she needed to remedy that by proving that she never liked Eric.

But first, she had to be sure that Eric would reciprocate Charlotte's feelings.

"What were you doing with Charlotte?" she asked.

He huffed. "Is this a ploy to make me not talk about your coming late again? Charlotte has been covering up for you by adding the jackets she's sewn to your pile.

"Now, the management wants to relieve her of her duties. Is that what you want? Do you want your friend to be dismissed because of your sloppiness and lateness?"

Her lips twitched. Eric had only talked about how the management wanted to dismiss Charlotte from work and never mentioned they wanted to do the same to her.

His concern that Charlotte could be dismissed showed how much he cared. She wondered if he had more feelings for her friend than he was willing to admit.

"Alright," she replied, "I didn't know things were that bad or I would have told her to stop. I'll find a way to solve that problem. But you haven't answered my—"

Eric interrupted with another accusation. "So, you never planned to tell me about your mother's sickness and death. I wonder if this is how our courtship would have been."

"I found you in a compromising position with my friend, yet you claim that you want to court me?" Rachel shot back.

"Well, you never agreed to my proposal. Talking to her helped me get your attention."

Rachel sighed. He was being indirect with her, unlike his usual self. If they continued throwing accusations at each other, they would both leave this room very angry.

Deciding to be forthright with him, she walked up to him and stopped right in front of him. She looked up at him, hoping he would see the sincerity in her eyes.

"I want to know who you really love, Eric. The truth is that I don't love you. I tried to. I kept trying to picture you and me in a happy marriage, but I couldn't see myself as your wife.

"I want you to be happy, not married to me in a loveless marriage. That is why I've been unable to agree to your proposal. I was coming here today to tell you to look for another woman.

"But when I saw Charlotte here with you, I realized you might like each other. I want to know what you really want. Do you want to court my friend, or are you playing with her?"

He sighed. "Fine, I'll tell you. I'm already twenty-eight and have been thinking of settling down with a homely woman who can bear children and make a good wife.

"When I observed you in the factory and saw how quiet, calm, and peaceful you are, I felt you would be the right woman for me. So, I asked to court you.

"But you never agreed to my proposal. You never said yes or no. After a while, you started coming late to work and not sewing all the garments allotted to you. You were so secretive when I asked you, it was infuriating.

“That was when Charlotte and I started talking. She was always making excuses for you, but she refused to tell me what was actually happening.

“As we kept talking, I noticed she was a loyal, lovely, lively, and friendly person. Besides, I prefer someone who is talkative to a woman who keeps secrets from me.”

While Eric hadn't confessed his love for Charlotte or stated his intentions to court her, he'd implied that he preferred Rachel's lively friend to her. Considering what she already knew about her supervisor, Rachel hoped he would treat Charlotte well. She smiled.

“Well, you know what to do to court her. Just don't break my friend's heart.”

With that, she hung her coat and went into the factory hall. She had one more person to talk to. As she sat down, she noticed that Charlotte avoided looking at her.

“Have you ever thought of Eric courting you, of getting married to him?” she asked.

Charlotte smiled demurely, a blush appearing on her cheeks. A few seconds later, a look of horror appeared on her face as she realized that anyone who might have been listening knew precisely what she thought about Eric even if she hadn't said a word.

“I... It doesn't matter what I think. He's getting married to you, Rachel. He wants to court you,” she replied.

“No, he doesn't. I think he prefers you.”

She explained to Charlotte that she wasn't angry with her and she didn't want to marry Eric. However, she didn't tell her friend about her relief that she wasn't really hurting Eric, which settled things nicely.

With that option now off the table, Rachel decided to reply to the mail-order bride advertisement. It would afford her the opportunity to have a family of her own and to find her father. Then, she would ask him why he abandoned them.

She went home that day feeling giddy about speaking to D. In her room, she took some ink and paper and began to pen a letter to the man from Fort Worth, whose advertisement had so resonated with her.

Having never answered a mail-order bride advert before, she wasn't exactly sure what to do. Upon further contemplation, she decided to pour out her heart, like she suspected D had done. She wrote:

Hello D,

I saw your mail-order bride advertisement, and I must say that your words caught my attention right from the start. I see that we long for the same thing—a family.

And, in a way, my situation is similar to yours.

My name is Rachel from Rochester, New York. I am twenty-one years old, of average height, with bright blue eyes and chestnut blonde hair. I work as a sewing machine operator in a garment factory called Louis Landal.

I just lost my mother. She had tuberculosis for a long while, and she died last week. My Pa traveled when I was fifteen. I haven't seen him or heard from him since then.

That day, I lost him without warning, not knowing if he would ever come back. I've lost all hope of talking to him ever again.

But I've always longed for a family, love, togetherness, and happiness—something I believe you and I can have in abundance...

The sun was high in the sky when Daniel rode excitedly onto the ranch, holding the pack of letters in a small bag.

He was glad he'd listened to Silas and put in the mail-order bride advertisement. He hadn't received one or two replies as he had expected—instead, he'd received more than twenty letters.

Thankfully, he had completed his morning chores for the day before going to the post office. The cows, sheep, and goats were grazing peacefully.

He had inspected the traps, chicken coop, and barn to see if there was any work he'd missed. Everything was in place.

Daniel decided that the ranch hands, Bernard and George, or the housekeeper, Adeline, could attend to any other pressing matters. He was going to sort through and read the letters.

He went into his room in the house he shared with Travis and randomly picked one. He was immediately repulsed by the letter.

It sounded like the woman was gushing over his words and thinking that he was romantic. She didn't let Daniel know what she wanted, neither did she seem to have anything in common with him.

He set it aside and picked another. The second letter was from an eighteen-year-old lady. He wanted to correspond with a woman between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-six, so her hands would be

strong enough to work on the ranch even if she had to learn.

The third letter wanted to find out how rich he was. The fourth sounded gentle, comely. Still, Daniel wanted something more.

He wanted someone who longed for the same thing he did.

As he kept reading, just as he was about to finish the pile of letters, he came across her letter. She said her name was Rachel from Rochester, New York.

She was from the East and she'd never worked on a ranch, but it was her words that touched him the most.

...Imagine having a family that always stays together.

Imagine you and me having picnics in the countryside and our children running and playing in the fields. Imagine you and me living in our own cottage as husband and wife.

I have always longed for a husband who loves me, not just someone that wants to marry because it is his duty. I can love fiercely, D.

Somewhere in my heart, your words ring a bell, telling me that you are the one for me.

Let us get to know each other; let us start a correspondence. Who knows? Maybe the heavens brought us together for this purpose, to be a match filled with love and peace.

So, tell me about Fort Worth, Texas, and the ranch. Tell me about your childhood, too. I would like to know more about you.

Hopefully yours,

Rachel McAllister

Daniel reread the letter. Rachel's mother had just died, and her father

had left them when she was younger. Like him, she understood what it meant to lose both parents.

Daniel quickly read all the other letters, but they all fell short compared to the letter of the lady from Rochester.

Only hers was similar to his situation. Only she seemed to have written from the depths of her heart.

He could feel the longing she had from the words she'd written. He could see her blue eyes looking far off, imagining the both of them having a picnic or taking a walk around a park.

He wanted to meet her, to hear her say the words to him with her own mouth. He wanted to inhale her scent and know the kind of food she preferred.

Although she wasn't a farm girl, she said she worked in a factory. If that was true, she would be hardworking. In a little time, she would learn and they wouldn't have to worry about her setting fire to any part of the ranch or causing other damage.

The sound of cattle moving brought him out of his thoughts. He looked outside and saw that it was already evening. Silas and Bernard, a short, stocky ranch hand, were herding the animals in.

He decided to seek Silas's opinion first. That way, he would know if the woman was genuine or if he was getting happy about her reply too soon.

He tucked Rachel's letter into his coat and threw the others into the bin. Then, he joined the men to herd the animals into their respective sheds.

When they had completed their task, Daniel called Silas aside to check the traps. There, he told Silas about the mail-order bride letters.

The younger man smiled and thumped him on the back. "I'm glad you

took my advice. So, did you find a lady you like? Is there anyone you want to start a correspondence with?"

"Yes, there is. Her name is Rachel," he said, bringing out the letter.

Silas skimmed through it. "I think you should give it a try. She might be the right one for you."

Daniel smiled. He felt more confident about speaking to Travis about Rachel after Silas's answer; the ranch hand was more experienced in such matters.

He searched for his uncle and found him sitting by the table in the kitchen.

Adeline had prepared some chicken fried steak and cranberry pie for supper. The table was set for everyone living there, and she started serving their food.

After a while, Silas and Bernard came in and sat down. George, a tall, thin ranch hand, came in a few seconds later. Daniel sat down to eat with them and made light conversation.

As he savored the chicken and enjoyed the delicious pie, he watched the way they laughed and joked among themselves. Travis treated everyone living on his ranch well.

In a way, they were all family. Surely, his uncle wouldn't be opposed to his having a wife who would sit beside him and have a conversation over supper.

He presented the letter to Travis, stating his intention to start corresponding with Rachel. "I think she would make a fine bride," he said.

Travis took the letter from him and read through it, frowning. Daniel waited with bated breath.

"Why would you want a wife, Daniel?" Travis asked. "You don't need a woman to help out on the ranch or to cook. We have enough hands, and Adeline can prepare any meal you want."

"Will Adeline also bear children for me? I want a woman to love and to have children with," he said, hoping his uncle would see that he needed a wife for more vital things than handling basic ranch tasks.

"Your having a wife would only spoil things. You have forgotten so soon what happened to us, how we lost our farms and had to start from scratch.

"Remember what I had to do so we can build this ranch to this point. Now, you want to bring in another young woman to come and cause another disaster?" Travis retorted.

"Just wait till you're a bit older. Then you'll know a lot more about the world and can marry a woman who is older and experienced enough not to go about causing problems."

"Travis, let the boy be," Adeline said. "Getting married isn't all bad. There are husbands and wives who got married at his age and have it good into their old age."

"Then why are you not yet married?" he replied.

At that, Adeline kept quiet and continued eating.

Daniel wanted to protest, to bring up the example of Silas and his mail-order bride that had caused him no problem, but he didn't. He knew why Travis was reluctant to trust any woman.

It was all because of the fire.

The memory was hazy to him, but he could still make out some of it. He'd been at the edge of the field instead of harvesting the crop as his mother had asked of him and Rose.

Travis's bride-to-be was helping his parents out. Daniel had been waving to Travis, who was riding home, when he heard some screaming.

He turned to see the fire spreading across the dry grass. It quickly engulfed his family and Travis's betrothed.

Daniel had run to them despite the heat. The fire had been so hot that little Daniel had broken into a sweat, yet he sprinted toward his family, screaming, "Pa, Ma, Rose."

Suddenly, a rough hand had grabbed his arms and stopped him from going any further. He looked back to see Travis staring down at him and shaking his head.

He'd turned around to see his family lying on the grass, their bodies burning.

That day, Travis held him and pressed little Daniel's head on his shoulder, making sure the boy didn't see how the fire had mutilated the bodies of his family members as he ran out of the field.

All Daniel could remember was how he'd thought the sweaty smell of Uncle Travis's shirt was better than inhaling the smoke all around him.

He was grateful for his uncle's actions. If he'd seen what the fire had eventually turned his parents and sister into, he was sure the image would have haunted him till now.

Daniel had later learned that Travis's wife-to-be had started the fire, so he understood the pain his uncle had suffered. He went through something similar.

But still, he had to find that love he'd known as a child. He couldn't keep living in the past, wondering what having a family of his own would feel like.

He'd chosen Rachel to marry, and that was that.

Once he'd corresponded with her and was sure she would make a fine bride, he would ask her to marry him. Their union would show Travis that some marriages could be peaceful without any trouble.

Daniel hoped Rachel wouldn't make mistakes like his uncle's betrothed. If she didn't, everything would move along smoothly.

It was the only way his uncle would come around to agreeing with him.

Spring had arrived, and with it, the cloud of sadness that had surrounded Rachel had dissipated into anticipation. She still lived in the little room in the boarding house and still worked at Louis Landal, but she no longer had Eric chasing after her.

Charlotte had become more open in displaying her affections toward him. She smiled more when he came to talk to her and seemed to become alive and full of joy.

Rachel herself was much happier, too; she even felt lighter. She no longer went to work late.

No matter what time she slept, she always woke up early because she knew her time in New York was short. Soon, she would be leaving for Texas to meet her love.

Yes, she could say that what she felt for Daniel was love, although they hadn't met.

After she'd sent the first letter, he had replied to her heartily with pages of tales about his childhood. She'd been so delighted at his enthusiastic response that she had sent an equally long letter back.

In no time, they were sending letters to each other frequently. Sometimes, she sent another missive to him without waiting for his reply to her last letter, and he did the same.

In these letters, Rachel had learned that Daniel stayed in his uncle's

ranch—Hickman Ranch—and had begun to build a cottage for himself. She immediately knew the house was for the two of them.

She envisioned sewing quilts, curtains, blinds for their cottage. Most of all, she wanted to know what it looked like—its color, and how big the rooms were.

But she didn't ask. No matter how well he described the house, she knew she would keep wondering.

She had also learned how Daniel cherished his uncle and wanted to make him happy. Rachel decided that even though Daniel had no father, she would take Travis as her father-in-law once she arrived at the ranch.

She hoped Daniel had understood all she'd written to him about her work, family, and childhood. She hadn't told him that her pa was in Texas because she didn't know how to search for Steven and she might never see him again no matter what effort she put in.

Presently, it was a Sunday afternoon. She hurried to the park, her footsteps pattering on the street. She loved wearing one of her mother's old dresses from when they were rich, sitting on a quilt under the shade of a tree, and reading Daniel's letters.

With spring had come growing, colorful plants and a refreshing smell. The bright spring flowers and the atmosphere made her feel elated and satisfied.

Besides, her correspondence with Daniel had lessened her grief. Slowly, she was forgetting the pain of Lily's death.

When the room was lonely at night, she only had to pick a letter and read or imagine dancing with Daniel at Hickman Ranch. Rachel was surprised by how far she'd come from feeling cold and alone to having something beautiful to look forward to.

On this Sunday, she went to her favorite park—Johnson's Square Park

—wearing her mother's black gown. She opened the package quickly, careful not to tear any part of the paper or stamp so she could store it later.

There were two papers, several train tickets, and some money. She unfolded the letter quickly and began to read.

As she read through it, her heart skipped with delight. Daniel had finally asked her! She read the part of the letter that included his proposal over and over.

...to you, my dear Rachel. I wanted to make the ranch much more beautiful for you. A lady with a lovely soul like yours deserves that and much more.

But I cannot wait much longer. My heart calls out for you every time I see your letter or remember something you wrote. I want you here by my side, to love and to hold, as my wife.

I want to hear your voice, to run my hands through your hair, to see the color of your eyes for myself. I want to be lost in the depths of your gaze forever, my darling.

But how can that ever happen if you are across the world in New York and I am here in Texas?

My Rachel, I long to be enveloped in your scent, to feel your warmth as you lie by my side. Will you marry me, Rachel?

Please say yes so we can be together and build a family filled with love, just like we've always wanted.

That is why you will find enclosed in this letter a train ticket and thirty dollars for you to come to Fort Worth. Will it be enough?

If it is not, rest assured, I will reimburse you when you arrive at Hickman Ranch. I have also written directions for your journey on another paper.

Please wear a blue gown when you are coming. Kindly reply to this letter before you leave so I will know when you will be arriving at Fort Worth.

Yours,

Daniel

Rachel jumped and shouted in delight, not minding the surprised stare she got from a couple strolling past. She was going to Fort Worth to meet her husband.

She sat down to pen her reply.



That evening, Rachel rushed to Charlotte's house.

They were a family of seven: the parents, with three male and two female children. Charlotte's older sister had gotten married the previous year to a handsome man that lived on the other side of Rochester.

Rachel greeted the older brothers and parents. She rushed into the room where her friend was mending a dress, banging the door in the process.

Charlotte stood up in alarm. "What happened, Rachel? I hope there's nothing wrong."

She grinned. "No, there isn't. Daniel asked me to marry him."

Charlotte's face fell, a reaction Rachel didn't expect.

"It's great that Daniel has asked you to be his wife, Rachel. I've watched how you've lit up since you started corresponding with him; your work output has improved, and you're happier and friendlier.

"But I was hoping you would find someone else in Rochester who

would love you,” Charlotte said. “Besides, are you sure he is really who he says he is?”

“I believe him. Daniel wouldn’t lie to me.”

“That’s what Linda said, but she ended up getting married to a sixty-year-old man who said he was thirty. I’ve heard stories, Rachel.

“There are so many women from the factory who have been mail-order brides. They were happy before embarking on the journey to the West.

"But on getting there, they found out that the letter was full of lies. Either their husband-to-be was dishonest about his occupation or his appearance. Some even found out that the man they had been corresponding with already had a wife."

Rachel thought about Daniel’s letters, the way he’d opened up to her and wrote in detail. He wouldn’t lie to her, would he?

She shook her head. He wouldn’t.

"No, Daniel wouldn’t lie to me. If you read his letters, you’ll understand what I’m talking about. You can feel the sincerity in his words when you read them."

"Look, I just don't want you to get hurt. You've been through so much already, and I want the best for you."

Rachel squared her shoulders and turned a deaf ear to Charlotte’s words. Building a family with a man who loved her was her dream.

She finally had her chance to live in the countryside with her husband and the potential of having children; she wouldn’t let anybody stop her.

She moved the pile of torn clothes on the bed to the side and sat down.

"I'm going to Fort Worth, Texas, by the end of this month to meet Daniel and get married to him," she said stubbornly.

Charlotte sighed. "I knew your letter exchange would end in this way. Once you set your mind on something, you don't change it. Oh well, if that's your decision, I can't stop you.

"But how about having another plan in case things go awry? If you get to Texas and what you find there is not up to your expectation, you need to have an alternative so you won't be stranded or be forced to marry against your will."

Rachel chuckled. There was no way she could marry Daniel against her will.

She loved him, though she'd stopped herself from telling him so in her letters. She wanted to see him first before openly declaring her love.

But somehow, Charlotte's words began to get to her. Her friend could be right. Besides, it wouldn't hurt to be cautious.

"What kind of plan?" she asked.

"I'm not so sure. You decide what the plan would be. For example, you can save some money so that if Daniel maltreats you, you'll be able to buy a ticket quickly without being at his mercy."

Rachel didn't think Daniel would maltreat her in any way, but she nodded to help assuage Charlotte's fears.

"Alright," she said. "I'll do that."

She started helping Charlotte with the mending; she tacked some clothes and loosened some others. She would be going to work from her friend's house the next day, so they worked together and talked.

All through, Rachel's mind wasn't in the conversation.

She thought about how her husband-to-be would look. He'd said he was tall, but that was all she knew. She saw him wearing a cowboy hat and boots and riding on a horse.

She wondered if he would be as lively as he was in his letters.

She imagined their family with four children—two boys and two girls. There could be more, if fate allowed.

When she was younger, she'd yearned for siblings and a large family. Finally, she would have her very own family to love and cherish.

But somewhere in the recesses of her mind, Charlotte's words kept coming back to her. Would Daniel deceive her?

She didn't think so. But what if her friend was right and the man she'd come to love wasn't as good as he seemed in his letters?

If that was the case, she knew she was making a very costly mistake, for her journey to Texas wasn't only a physical one. Her heart had traveled to Fort Worth a long time ago.

If she'd been deceived, it might never come back.

Travis Hickman rode Daisy along the borders of the ranch, checking to make sure the barbed wire fence was sturdy.

Some parts of it had broken, and he'd told Bernard to mend it. He wanted to ensure that the man hadn't missed any wire.

He patted Daisy fondly. The mare had been three years old when the wildfire occurred. She was the only horse that had been burned by the fire and survived.

Since then, she'd become tenacious and loyal to Travis.

It was the same kind of loyalty that Travis demanded from all his workers and Daniel—the only person he considered family. They had to do his bidding, obey his wishes. They had to be strong and reliable, just like his ranch.

After the fire, he'd sold the former land he and his brother owned. He had then bought new land and spent several years building his ranch from scratch.

Now that he was almost fifty years old, Travis believed in steadiness and reliability. He'd taught his nephew the same principles, and the boy had never deviated from them.

So, it was a wonder to him when he saw Daniel riding toward him and waving a letter, shouting, "She said yes. She agreed to marry me."

“Who?” he asked. “That girl from New York?”

“Of course, who else?”

Travis thought they’d agreed for his nephew to wait a while. But not only had he gone along to correspond with the girl, he’d asked her to marry him.

He tried to recall the details he had read about the lady—Rebecca, Rachel? He couldn’t. She’d just suddenly accepted a man’s proposal to come and live in the West.

What kind of woman would agree to do that? Was she running away from something in New York?

But instead of pointing all this out to Daniel immediately, he continued inspecting the fence. If he opposed his nephew right away, the boy would protest and not listen to him.

“Join me to inspect the fence and the traps beyond it for any weakness,” he said.

They had put traps on the other side of the fence to ensure no animals or humans came near the ranch. Travis kept riding, remembering how he’d insisted on building this fence with barbed wire instead of wood. It ensured thieves didn’t steal his bulls and other animals.

While conducting the inspection, he cast glances at Daniel. He noticed his nephew couldn’t keep still; he was wriggling his body to a rhythm that was probably playing in his head.

When Travis got to the place he termed the weakness in their fence security, he stopped. That part was made of wood.

The barbed wire he’d bought from Ohio more than a decade ago had run out in the middle of the construction. Instead of leaving the farm open to raiders, he had hastily used any available log of wood to fence this stretch.

He'd never gotten around to buying more barbed wire. Their luck was that trees hid this part of the ranch; most outsiders thought every section was fenced with barbed wire.

"How do wild animals steal sheep, Daniel?" he asked.

"They prey on the weak: the sick, the injured, the lambs."

He nodded solemnly. "When you want to prevent or cause disaster in a group, you find its true strength. And the true strength of any group lies in the weakest member."

He examined the wooden fence closely, careful to check for any rot. His hands felt the smooth surface.

Although the wood looked like the strongest part of the fence, it was the weakest. The wood wasn't suitable for security purposes.

After a long while, he stopped. "For how long did you exchange letters with this lady?"

"Rachel and I have been corresponding for three months."

"Then why should she suddenly say yes to your proposal? You haven't even known each other for long."

Daniel raised his chin. "I asked her to come. I'm tired of waiting and hoping that she's the right person. I can already see she has all the qualities I want in a wife."

"Maybe she does, or maybe she doesn't. You never know until you meet her."

"I..." Daniel paused and looked away; he couldn't argue against that point.

Travis's lips twitched. He knew his nephew agreed with him because he kept quiet.

Spring had arrived in full force with greener pastures for the animals to feed on. The sun was setting, casting shadows about. As it dipped below the horizon as if tucking itself inside the hills and mountains, the sky erupted into a mixture of bright orange, red, and blue colors.

Although Daniel looked downcast, Travis felt proud of himself at that moment. He'd achieved something as beautiful as the sunset.

He had saved the weakest member of his family from disaster and had ensured that no weaker person was added in the name of getting a wife. Most importantly, he'd stopped his nephew—the only person he could call a son—from getting hurt by a woman.

He tipped his hat to himself as a breeze wooshed past his ears.

Just then, he heard a horse trotting; Silas was riding toward them. On seeing Silas, Daniel's countenance changed.

"I believe she'll be genuine," he told his uncle. "Not all mail-order brides cause problems."

His nephew was talking about Silas's bride. The ranch hand's wife had given birth a few months ago, and he would be returning to Louisiana in a few days.

When Silas arrived, he told them that supper was ready and rode to the barn. Travis waited till Silas had gone around the house to the kitchen door by the side before continuing the discussion.

If he'd kept talking about the matter while he was crossing the field, the thought of Silas's wife and child would only make his nephew stubbornly plow on to invite the lady onto the ranch.

He turned to Daniel and said, "I understand your desire to love and be loved because I was once like you—young and ready to take on the world.

"I wanted to travel to see every part of the world until I met my

betrothed. She made me want to give up everything for her. But instead of giving me the love I craved or letting things remain status quo, my darling Caroline started a fire that made me lose everything, except you."

"Every woman is not the same; we all know that," Daniel argued. "Imagine all women were like Adeline. Would every man like that? No..."

"Look, Daniel, I understand what is happening to you. You're a young man, so you're eager to get married and experience a woman in your arms.

"You never had time to talk to or think about women. Now that this lady has shown some interest, you want to rush things and start a family without investigating who she really is."

"Just give her a chance. She probably won't make the same mistakes as Caroline," Daniel replied. "Plus, you got it wrong.

"The strength of a group doesn't lie in the weakest member. It lies in the ability of the strong to shield the weak and teach them to increase their strength."

Travis pondered the words for a while. For some reason, the sunset didn't look as beautiful anymore. He could only smell the cow dung in the field.

As his nephew was about to leave, he said, "What will happen if your New York lady is unable to make you happy in the long run?"

Daniel was silent.

The day for Rachel to say goodbye to Rochester, her best friend, and her grim past had finally arrived.

She was grateful Daniel had written directions for her journey from Rochester to Fort Worth. It made things a lot easier.

She would travel from Rochester to New York City, where she'd board a train at Grand Central Depot. She would then board several more trains and eventually arrive at Fort Worth through the Texas and Pacific Railway.

But first, she had to leave Rochester. Charlotte escorted her to where she would take a stagecoach out of the city.

She was finally leaving that cramped room to meet and marry Daniel. In her gut, she knew she'd made the right decision by agreeing to be his wife.

Though she couldn't explain why she felt that way, Rachel knew Daniel was the right husband for her.

Yet, as she rode in the wagon with Charlotte and drew near to the location of the stagecoaches, beads of sweat formed on her forehead. Her hands shook with nervousness.

She wasn't listening to her friend talk on and on about exchanging letters when she got to Texas. She didn't look at the streets of Rochester one last time to store the images in her memory, neither

could she smell the dirt near the factories.

Instead, she fiddled with her gown, wondering if Daniel would still like her when he eventually saw her.

She kept brooding until Charlotte said, "I want to thank you for how you handled the situation with Eric.

"We've gotten quite close, and I now understand how you feel about getting married to Daniel and wanting a husband. I think I want to get married to Eric someday."

With that, Charlotte gave her a big hug.

"Did you get enough money to travel back so that if things turn out differently, you can always come back to Rochester?" she asked.

Rachel hadn't. She'd tried. Well, she hadn't put much effort into saving some money, but she had tried nonetheless.

She couldn't do much because she'd owed for rent while spending all her money for Lily's funeral. After paying the boarding house, she had little left for her own upkeep.

Besides, she was determined to follow her heart. Deep down, she knew she would be happy as Daniel's wife.

They would have a marriage that would be the envy of others; people would wish they had the kind of relationship she and Daniel were going to build.

"You're quiet," Charlotte said after a few seconds. "Usually, when you're quiet after such questions, you don't agree with the expected answer or you didn't do as you said you would."

She gave Rachel some money, which she refused to take. "This is too much, Charlotte. Daniel already gave me some money."

"You'll use it for the journey and give him any that's left, won't you?" her friend asked, stuffing the money into Rachel's bag.

"You've already done so much for me," Rachel said, her eyes filling with tears. "How can I ever repay you?"

Charlotte shrugged. "I didn't think you would be able to save up any money considering all you spent for the funeral.

"I asked my parents and siblings to give me some money and we were able to come up with ten dollars. At least it will help you if you get stranded."

Rachel was grateful that she had such a caring friend. She hugged Charlotte and said, "Thank you so much. I'll miss you."

Charlotte went on to tell Rachel the advice her older sister gave her about taking care of her husband and ensuring that the love in their marriage grows.

As she spoke, Rachel realized she knew little about marriage. There was more to getting married and becoming a wife than she thought.

She'd let her emotions get the better of her without trying to learn skills that would be useful on a ranch. She couldn't even cook as the boarding house had prepared their meals and Mrs. Fowler had been her nanny and eventually cook and maid when she was younger.

She wondered what Daniel would think about that. Besides, how would she—a city girl—adapt to getting her hands dirty on the ranch all day?

But she was a hard-working woman. She resolved to learn; she would impress Daniel with how fast she learned to work on the ranch.

Becoming a cowgirl wouldn't pose so much of a problem.

Rachel boarded a stagecoach to leave Rochester with a bright smile on

her face. She liked the idea of becoming a cowgirl for her Daniel.



On getting to Fort Worth several days later, Rachel's nervousness returned. She'd worn her favorite blue gown on their last stop.

The dress was clean, soft, and still looked new because she hardly wore it. It was dark blue with silver laces and it had been quite expensive, but the reason she cherished it the most was that her pa had bought it for her ma just before he traveled to Texas.

In a way, the gown signified change. This time around, Rachel hoped the change would be infinitely good.

She came down from the train and saw some mail-order brides meeting their husbands-to-be for the first time. There were squeals of delight and hugs that made her feel shy.

She then boarded a stagecoach to Hickman Ranch and let herself breathe in the fresh country air after the wagon left the terminal. They drove through the town, and she took note of the buildings, the numerous flowers, and the lively townsfolk.

As soon as she arrived at the ranch, Rachel brought down her box and paid for the drive.

She was contemplating knocking on the gate when it opened and a young man wearing a white shirt stepped out. The sight of him took her breath away.

He was very tall. He had a mustache and a goatee, just like Daniel had described himself.

But his other facial features caught her attention—his eyes were the color of honey, his eyebrows seemed to have been carved by an artist, and the wind blew his dark hair backward, giving him a regal appearance.

Immediately his eyes met hers, his lips stretched out into a wide smile that transformed his face and made him look even more handsome.

“Daniel?” she said in a low voice, biting her lip.

“Rachel?” he asked.

She nodded, and he examined her from head to toe. "You are beautiful."

Rachel's cheeks flushed. She liked the timbre of his voice. He sounded musical, as if he were half-singing, half-talking.

She could feel her stomach flutter, her chest suddenly getting heavy. She'd never experienced something like that before, but she wanted to explore it further.

“Wait here,” he said. “We’ll go to the priest’s house first.”

“But what about your uncle?”

“We’ll see him soon enough. I want us to do things the right way from the beginning. Let’s get married, then we can come back to the ranch and celebrate.”

Rachel didn’t think things should pan out that way, but she resolved to trust him with his decision. She chose not to question why Travis or the other people on the ranch weren’t going with them to the priest’s house.

As Daniel drove the wagon, she cast side glances at him. When they'd been exchanging letters, she hadn't dwelled on his physical attributes.

She'd never thought he would be this captivating.

She turned to admire him again. He glanced at her, and she quickly looked away. Did his lips just twitch? Was he laughing at her?

She was about to discreetly look when she felt his body moving closer to hers. Her mouth suddenly went dry, her heart beating erratically.

Her eyes widened, staring openly at him. What was he about to do? His face was getting closer! His lip...

His hand reached out and tugged her hair; his fingers drew back with a tiny leaf.

“You had something in your hair,” he said, then brushed her hair with his hands. The touch sent a shock through her.

After that, they shared some meaningful glances. Rachel’s heart soared and filled with hope as they continued on their way to the priest’s house.

The wedding was a simple ceremony. The priest blessed them and they said their vows; then they signed a marriage contract.

All through, Rachel felt happy. This event was something she’d always dreamed of. Finally, she was getting married to someone she loved.

As they left the priest’s house and Daniel drove to the ranch, she was filled with anticipation. She wanted to see her new home, Travis, the other people on the ranch.

She wanted to know what it felt like to have a family again.

“Rachel, my wife,” Daniel said, as though he was getting used to calling her that, “I know we’re just meeting for the first time, and I don’t want to rush things. If you don’t feel comfortable, we can stay in separate rooms until you’re ready.”

She heaved a sigh of relief. It was considerate of him to think of how she would feel about such matters. She would feel awkward sleeping in the same room with him that day.

She could hardly stay in the same wagon without feeling that her

heart was running away from her chest. It would only take a little while before they could live in the same room.

She nodded and smiled. "It's all right."

She decided to write letters to Charlotte, her aunt, and her pa. Charlotte would reply quickly, but her aunt and father were a different case.

She couldn't understand why her aunt hadn't responded about Lily's death and hoped everything was alright with her, but she would send her a missive nevertheless. As for Steven, Rachel hoped he would respond to his daughter once he saw that she now lived in Texas.

As they drove through the town, Rachel could see new possibilities. She'd left New York with no family. Now, she had a husband and would soon have children of her own.

The future was bright; when one home was taken away from her, she'd finally found another place to call home.

Daniel drove onto Hickman Ranch with gusto.

Silas had traveled a few days ago to meet his family, and the others were busy. Travis was supervising Bernard and George, who were feeding the animals, while Adeline was picking eggs.

They all turned as he drove onto the ranch, surprised looks on their faces.

He'd been loitering outside the ranch gate and going to the railway station every morning for the past few days, hoping to see Rachel first before she met Travis.

He'd finally met her today after a long wait. Then, he had quickly married her so that even if his uncle objected, they would already be wedded and he wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

Well, they all knew she had agreed to marry him, but they didn't know she would be arriving so soon. And they'd certainly not prepared.

Besides, it was already afternoon; he'd spent a lot of time journeying to the priest's house and back. But Daniel didn't mind.

He'd married his wife; that was all that mattered.

He came down from the wagon and helped Rachel climb down. He saw Adeline rushing toward them.

“Oh my,” she said, looking at Rachel from head to toe. “You’ve brought your bride without telling us, Daniel.

“Now, I didn’t prepare the feast I’d planned for her. What will she think about our hospitality at Hickman Ranch?”

She extended a hand to Rachel. "My name is Adeline."

"I'm Rachel," she replied, giving the older woman a handshake.

Adeline waved the reply off. “We all know your name. Daniel here has told us a lot about you.

“I hope you’re ready to live a happy life, my dear. Daniel is a caring man who looks out for others. I’m sure he will take care of you very well.”

With that, she rushed off to the kitchen. Bernard and George came soon after and introduced themselves to Rachel.

“Now, we have one woman at the ranch to soften Travis,” George said. “We’ve had too many men here.”

“Enjoy your new bride,” Bernard said to Daniel, winking.

At that, Rachel blushed and looked away. Daniel wanted to hold her arms and guide her away from the teasing duo, but he recalled what happened in the wagon.

She hadn’t told him in her letters that her straight blond hair cascaded down her shoulders and past the middle of her back. She hadn’t cared to mention that her skin was so light, it seemed she’d never gone under the sun, or that her lips were pink and enthralling.

If she’d described herself better in the missives, he would have shielded himself against her beauty.

But he’d caught her casting heated glances at him in the wagon. He’d

looked at her face and wondered what it would feel like to touch it, to caress her cheeks with his fingers, to see how soft those lips were.

It had taken all the control he had to only take out the leaf in her hair. If he touched her arm now, he might not stop there.

He turned to see Rachel walking with the ranch hands toward his uncle. She raised the hem of her gown and walked as quickly as she could manage, but Travis didn't turn toward her or act like he could hear someone coming.

Daniel walked hurriedly to them, hoping the older man was in a good mood.

"Greetings, sir," Rachel said, her back ramrod straight.

When Travis didn't reply, she started fiddling with her gown. After a while, a determined look came across her face and she spoke louder, "Greetings, sir. I'm sure that—"

"Daniel, who is this?" Travis asked him, interrupting Rachel and at the same time not acknowledging her greeting.

Rachel looked between nephew and uncle. "But I thought Daniel... he wrote that he already told you about me."

Daniel felt anger building up within him. Why would Travis ask such a question before Rachel when he already knew about Daniel's intentions?

His uncle could be difficult at times, but Daniel couldn't understand why Travis would embarrass his wife in that manner.

"Uncle," he said, "this is not the time to act like this. You clearly know who she is."

"I am Rachel." Her voice was soft, pleading. "Rachel Hickman—your nephew's wife."

Travis ignored her and kept talking to Daniel. "Oh, she's the girl you've been exchanging letters with."

At that, Rachel smiled a little, a hopeful look appearing on her face. But Travis wasn't smiling. His face had contorted into a frown as he regarded her from head to toe.

"I *clearly* told you about my misgivings, Daniel. How will a city girl from New York fit on a ranch in the Southwest?

"Can her soft hands handle the work here? Or will she just go about making mistakes?"

"Uncle Travi—"

"Well, you should have waited before getting married to her. You should have brought her to the ranch and let her stay a few weeks so that we can decide if she's suitable before running off to the priest to get married.

"But what did you go off and do? You didn't even tell us that she would be arriving today. Now, here she is, and we're unprepared for her arrival.

"Although I'm practically your father, you didn't accord me the respect of approving the marriage. As far as I'm concerned, she's some girl you brought from New York, not your wife.

"When she proves she's suitable for you and Hickman Ranch, she can bear that title."

With that, Travis marched out to the fence where the traps lay, leaving Bernard and George to gape at him.

"Don't mind him," George said, "he's in a sour mood today."

But Rachel wasn't listening. Her lips quivered. Her eyes were watery with tears, and she was batting her eyelids to keep from crying.

"I was already at the ranch," she said to Daniel. "You should have let me come in before going to the priest for the marriage vows."

At that moment, Daniel forgot about his beating heart or his desire not to lose control. His hands went around Rachel's small back.

She stiffened and looked at him in surprise as he guided her away from the prying eyes of the ranch hands.

"I'm sorry for how my uncle talked to you," he said, aware of how a sensation was spreading from his hands to the rest of his body.

"He takes time to warm up to people, and he has been in a sour mood the past few weeks. He'll soon get used to you. Then he'll be kind. Let me show you around the ranch."

After Rachel had calmed down, he removed his hand and walked with her. She was afraid of the bulls, so they strolled around the edge of the field.

He pointed out Travis' house to her, the cabin where Adeline and the ranch hands stayed, the barns, the holding paddock, the chicken coop, and the kitchen.

When he showed her the stream on the western part of the ranch, her smile grew. He could see that she loved it. That was one thing they had in common.

Then he sang to her in a silly, crooked voice. He made up the song along the way, singing about how she would become a rancher.

She laughed as he sang. "That's not how to sing at all," she said.

He smiled. "But it makes you laugh, my darling."

At that, she was quiet for a few seconds. Her eyes filled with an emotion he couldn't place. "It does," she said.

“If it makes you happy, then it’s the best way to sing.”

They kept strolling, making sure to avoid where Travis stood. She asked several questions, and he answered them all.

Finally, he picked her box from the wagon and they made their way to the cottage. Daniel was glad he’d built the house without his uncle’s consent. That had been a wise decision.

The cottage was painted white with a dark blue roof and lintels. Blue was Rachel’s favorite color, and he wanted to dedicate the house to her.

When they got there, a grin appeared on her face. She ran to it and touched the stone walls adoringly, her eyes shining with delight.

“You made this for us. It’s beautiful.”

At that, a feeling of joy spread inside Daniel. He and his wife would be far away from their uncle’s animosity, and they would have the chance to create a happy family.

Before he’d finished processing the thought, she ran to him and embraced him. Daniel was aware of everywhere she touched—her hands around his back, her head that barely reached his shoulders and rested on his neck, her body pressed to his.

He took in a ragged breath, his hands moving tentatively around her back. His head bent toward her, his forehead resting on her hair as he breathed her musky scent.

"This is the greatest gift anybody has ever given to me," she said. "You built a house for me, a house I can call my own."

She abruptly jumped back, looking around awkwardly as if she just realized that she'd hugged him in public and she wasn't comfortable with her action.

The ranch hands had abandoned their work and were staring at them while Adeline peered out from the kitchen door. Even Travis was looking in their direction.

Daniel didn't want to imagine the expression on his face. He hadn't known his uncle would be so opposed to his getting married.

He hoped the man would come around quickly and accept Rachel. She was his wife, after all, and he bet she was willing to learn.

Travis had been mean to Rachel this afternoon. If he got worse, Daniel wondered what would happen? Would the older man make his nephew choose between him and his wife?

If it boiled down to that, Daniel would stand by Rachel. He had to create a family of his own, after all.

If Travis rejected Rachel against all odds, Daniel might eventually have a massive problem in his hands. He may have to leave the ranch.

But he had lived here ever since his parents had passed on; it was the only home he'd ever known. He didn't want to be uprooted from his home just because he had decided to get married—a normal activity men and women engaged in.

He looked at Rachel, who was looking everywhere but at him. When their eyes eventually connected, she looked away immediately.

"Thank you for the cottage," she said.

Daniel smiled.

Her reaction was confirmation that she had feelings for him, too. She was going through the same torture as he.

Soon enough, she would long for his presence, his touch, his kiss; he would make sure of it. Then he would comfort her with his embrace and his warmth.

He would make her so happy that she would feel the bliss of her marriage. She would be so engrossed in the throes of passion that she would think only of him, day and night.

Soon.

Travis mounted a horse and bounded out of the ranch, furious.

He rode into town, not minding the direction he was heading.

He just needed to clear his head without seeing Daniel and that girl. He couldn't bear to watch them flirting on the ranch.

Not when it reminded him of several years earlier when he was in the same position. He remembered her as clear as day. *Caroline*. She'd been his sunshine.

They'd met when he went for business in Lockhart, a nearby town. She had just arrived from New York, and she had introduced herself as the friend of his partner's wife.

They'd started a conversation, and he had been impressed by how well she spoke and related. After that, he kept coming back to purchase goods in Lockhart so that he could talk to her.

Their friendship had blossomed into something more. Travis wanted her to always be by his side, so he asked for her hand in marriage.

She had agreed to his proposal but stated that she wanted her parents to be present for the wedding. In the interim, she lived with his brother's family until the day of the wedding, when she would come live with him.

Travis had been elated that he would soon be married to someone he loved and cared for, but he ignored his friends' warnings.

They'd told him she didn't have the experience to take care of the farm. He had laughed at them, stating that he'd mold her into a woman who would love and tend the ranch.

He'd thought he was making the best possible decision by marrying Caroline, but it had taken only one day for everything to turn around.

He was on his way back from a journey and was already close to the farm. One of the horses couldn't move any longer because they'd ridden all night, so he had stopped on a hill to rest the animals for a few minutes.

He'd watched his brother's family from the hill, hoping that his marriage would be as happy.

Daniel was running about at the edge of the field while Rose was bending toward some plants. His brother and wife were cultivating a section of the land.

Caroline was dumping debris on another section filled with dry grass; she wasn't placing the refuse at its designated spot, a patch of land filled with only sand and stones. When she lit the pile, his heart skipped, hoping the fire wouldn't spread because of the dry grass.

Travis felt Caroline hadn't given much thought to burning at the designated spot. If she'd grown up on a farm or ranch, her actions would have been different.

He wanted to call out to her to put out the fire, but he was too far away and his wagon was filled with supplies. The tired horses wouldn't be able to move fast while carrying it.

Sure enough, the fire began to spread as Travis unhitched the wagon from the stronger horse. He rode into the valley where he couldn't see the farm anymore, urging the animal to move faster.

By the time he got to the farm, it was engulfed in flames. Daniel was still at the edge of the field, rooted in one spot and screaming.

The eerie sound combined with the fading scream from his family, and Travis called out to him. It seemed the sound of his uncle's voice woke the boy up from his shock because he ran toward the fire, screaming for his pa and ma.

But they'd stopped making any sound. They were all lying on the ground, dead.

Travis had saved the boy from entering the fire in the nick of time. He'd refused to think of the fiery flames, the searing heat, or the disaster that had befallen him.

He had focused instead on running from the farm and protecting his nephew, the only family he had left.

They rode the horse to the wagon's location, after which they went to his friend Logan's house. Travis and Logan had asked the townsfolk to help put out the fire.

But the devastation was too strong. By the time the farm had stopped burning, acres of farmland lay bare. There were no plants or trees.

In their place, Travis only had the bland, powdery taste of ash and the smell of burning wood to remind him of his family's hard work.

Except for Daniel, all that was left of his family members was bones.

As he buried their corpses that day, he swore to himself that he would never make the mistake of marrying a woman who had never worked on a ranch.

The loss of his beloved had been so disheartening that he'd never considered marrying any other lady since then. He had simply sold the land and moved on.

Presently, Travis looked up and realized that he'd mindlessly ridden to the location of his former farm. The new owner had built a few houses and a corner store.

He sat on his horse and stared at the buildings for a while, thinking of where he had gone wrong with Daniel.

He'd taken him in as his son that day, grooming him and providing for his needs. To see him repeat the same mistake was aggravating.

If Rachel had come from a ranch or farm in the West or was a country girl, maybe he would have accepted her. But how would the girl from New York adapt to life on the farm?

She was just like Caroline—inept, lacking knowledge of farmwork. She was bound to make silly, costly mistakes.

And even if she didn't, she would get tired of all the chores she had to do on Hickman Ranch. Then she would leave, breaking his nephew's heart.

He was determined not to let that happen, and there was only one way to handle it. He would do everything possible to make Rachel leave soon.

That way, she wouldn't commit a colossal blunder that could be life-threatening, or worm her way into Daniel's heart and turn around to tear it to shreds.

He would find a way to send her away from the ranch before his nephew got too attached to her. He didn't know how he'd do it yet, but he knew the opportunity would arise soon enough—and he would make the most of it.

For now, Travis turned the horse and rode to Logan's bakery to see his friend. He couldn't stand the presence of the two lovebirds on his ranch.

Several days had passed since Rachel arrived at the ranch, but she felt as unwelcome as she had on the first day.

True to her word, Adeline had prepared a feast with assorted meals. Everyone, except Travis, had invited their friends and acquaintances.

The townsfolk congratulated Daniel on finding a wife and had been friendly to Rachel while telling her the history of Fort Worth.

It would have been the best welcoming party if the person whose approval she craved the most had been around.

She'd hoped, silently prayed, that Travis had only gone to bring his friends when he'd left before the party. She had waited for him all through the celebration and afterward when the ranch hands removed the dishes and benches from the field.

He had eventually ridden onto the ranch after everyone, except her and Daniel, had gone to bed. When Daniel asked him why he didn't attend, Travis had ignored him and went into his house.

Rachel had restrained herself from complaining about her husband's uncle in the letters she'd written and asked George to help her post.

She felt the relationship between Daniel and his uncle was degenerating because of her presence on the ranch. She didn't like that.

But to make matters worse, Travis refused to speak to her or call her by name. He never acknowledged her presence and spoke about her as if she was not there.

Rachel found the situation frustrating. She'd thought she would find a father in her husband's uncle, but she hadn't.

Although she and Daniel had become quite friendly, their relationship wasn't all sunshine and roses. She could see the strain on his face whenever his uncle was close by.

It was as if he was struggling between deferring to Travis and protecting her.

Rachel didn't want to be the cause of trouble between her husband and his uncle. She felt they could be one big family despite their misgivings and differences.

But if Travis wasn't speaking to her, how would he ever get to know if she was good enough to be his nephew's wife?

She would have to bond with Travis instead of waiting for him to warm up to her.

She was fed up with the situation. She would make sure he spoke to her, whether he wanted to start a conversation or not.

When she'd gathered enough courage to confront him one afternoon, she walked up to where he was checking the chickens for any disease.

"Howdy," she said, imitating the greeting she'd heard from the townsfolk at the welcome party.

Travis gave her a momentary glance and returned to his task.

"Hello," she repeated, "I'm talking to you, Uncle Travis."

He continued to ignore her. After several attempts to get his attention,

she raised her arms and dropped them in frustration.

"How long will this continue? Will you keep pretending that I'm not here? Well, you can act strange if you want. But I am your nephew's wife, and soon we'll have children.

"What will you do then?" she pressed. "Will you also pretend not to see our babies?"

Travis turned to her. "What makes you think you'll last long enough to have children with Daniel?"

Although Travis's words stung, Rachel smiled. This was the first time he had spoken directly to her since her arrival at Hickman Ranch.

"It's only a matter of time before I'll get pregnant," she replied.

"If you don't make a mistake before then."

"I'll never make a mistake where Daniel is concerned," she assured him.

"Besides, why do you keep worrying about my making mistakes? Have you ever given me a task and I didn't do it effectively?"

Travis chuckled, then said, "There's a lot to do, but you've refused to do any chores since you arrived.

"What do you think will happen when you start to learn tasks? I can bet you don't know how to take care of chickens, horses, or any of the other animals."

Rachel thought about what he'd just said. She had been so tired the first few days after her arrival that she woke up after the morning chores had been completed.

Whenever she offered to help Adeline with the dishes, the woman ordered her to get some more rest since she was a new bride.

She ended up asking Daniel, Bernard, or George to explain how they performed their duties at Hickman Ranch.

She needed to gain knowledge of how things worked first before getting engaged in manual labor. That way, she'd be able to complete her tasks effectively when the time came.

More than that, she'd hoped Travis would teach her useful skills so she could bond with him during the process.

"I was hoping you would teach me," she said.

"That's the problem, Rachel. I'm not here to train a baby; I never agreed with Daniel to do that.

"If you had come here without the intent of first snapping up my nephew before introducing yourself to me, I might have considered it. But you didn't," he said, checking the last hen in the coop.

"Everyone here works for a living, including me. We don't tolerate idle people who eat, sleep, and speak to the ranch hands without trying to help out."

Travis started walking out, and she hurried after him. It wasn't her fault that she hadn't grown up on a ranch, but she was willing to learn and work hard.

"I was trying to understand how things work here first," she said, pleading.

"You learn by doing," Travis said as he mounted a gelding that had been grazing nearby.

"At least give me some work first. Tell me what to do and see if I can do it well before deciding if I'm fit for Hickman Ranch."

Travis peered at her. A grin stretched across his face, his eyes glinting. "Of course, I'll tell you."

Hours later, Rachel regretted ever asking Travis to assign some tasks to her.

Her request had opened up a floodgate of chores that she wasn't sure she could finish in a few days, but he'd insisted she complete them that day.

He'd instructed her to feed the chickens, water their troughs, and clean the field, chicken coop, barn, paddocks, and Travis's house. She also had to help with the dishes and watch how the ranch hands herded the animals.

She decided to start by raking the field because there were hardly any fallen leaves. It was only later she realized that she had to clear the dung littered around.

She gathered it into a pile, covering her nose with a handkerchief to reduce the stench, then went to the chicken coop.

By the time she fed the chickens and cleaned the henhouse, it was afternoon and she was exhausted. Beads of sweat pooled on her forehead, around the scarf on her hair.

She dragged herself into the kitchen to wash the dishes, but Adeline shooed her away, telling her that she needed to rest.

Rachel didn't object. She trudged to the cottage, thinking about how she would clean Travis's house. She wondered if she would have to work every day on the ranch in this manner.

Although she'd worked from morning till night in Louis Landal, she had sat throughout. The effort she had put in was nothing compared to this experience.

She sat on the sofa in the cottage and decided to write some letters, but she soon fell into a deep sleep.

She woke up with a start several hours later and jumped up, ready to continue her chores. It was already dark, and the air was chilly.

A lamp sat on the table, casting shadows in the room.

Her stomach rumbled because she'd missed lunch and supper. She noticed a bowl of food on the table and gulped it down, reminding herself to thank Adeline in the morning.

She was about to go into her room when she recalled some of Charlotte's marriage advice. "*Talk to your husband every night so that you can create a bond between you two,*" she'd said.

Rachel hadn't taken the advice too seriously, but the recent tension between her and Daniel made her consider it.

He'd been the gentle, attentive, and jovial husband only the first day she'd arrived. Since then, he had kept his distance.

It was almost as if he was avoiding her while standing right in front of her.

She'd expected their communication to be similar to what they had written in the letters. But now that she was at Fort Worth and they had to work on the ranch every day, they hardly spoke.

She needed to talk to her husband. She'd been working alone all day, and she wanted to hear his voice assuring her that everything would be alright.

She picked up the lamp, walked to the room, and knocked on the door. Daniel grunted a reply and she entered.

The room had a bed, a stool beside it, and a cloth hanger and shelf by the wall. It could have looked better, but Rachel hadn't decorated the place—she didn't have the materials or the sewing machine to sew the curtains.

Daniel was lying face-up on the bed with a worried expression.

"Can we talk?" she asked and sat beside him.

He nodded without looking at her.

"I was wondering if we could go out for a picnic on Sunday or maybe go to town to see some places. I haven't left the ranch since I came to Fort Worth."

Daniel closed his eyes briefly. "We can't."

Rachel wondered why he was acting standoffish; he wouldn't even look at her.

"Why not?" she asked, swallowing her irritation at his behavior. "I've been cooped up on the ranch since I arrived. I just need to see somewhere else."

"That's what we do most days. We stay cooped up on the ranch to work."

His voice was low, yet it seemed to condemn her. Rachel breathed in and out slowly.

This was supposed to be a conversation between husband and wife; she'd imagined it would be sweet and pleasing.

"What are you implying?" she asked.

He turned toward her slowly. "I'm not implying anything, Rachel. Uncle Travis said you've not been putting in your share of work, and I agree with him."

"I worked today," she said in a surprised tone. "What do you mean, I've not been putting in my share of work?"

"Yes, you did. Besides what you did today, you've not worked since

you came to the ranch."

"But I told you that I've never been on a ranch before," she said weakly, already tired of the argument.

"I know, Rachel," he said softly. "Still, you should have made some attempts before today. Learning is a step-by-step process."

Rachel didn't know what to say to that. She'd never thought she would be having this kind of conversation with her husband. It was nothing like the letters at all.

She'd presumed they would keep talking about their hopes and dreams, but here they were talking about how much work she'd done and how much she hadn't.

She wondered if this was how all the mail-order bride marriages were.

First, they would experience euphoria when exchanging letters. Then, when the man and woman eventually got married, their happiness would be drained by everyday occurrences.

Already, she was very tired on her first day working on the ranch. She didn't think it would get much easier as time passed and she had to work some more.

Everything felt like drudgery; she could only see a future where she'd be working too hard to please her husband's uncle, who hardly ever spoke to her.

She stared at the lamp for a long while, watching the flames flicker.

"I made attempts," she finally said. "I wanted to understand how things worked on the ranch before trying to do any chores."

"Rachel, I know that it takes time to learn, but you need to show more effort. For a few days now, Uncle Travis has been complaining about what he calls your 'laziness.'"

He sighed, then continued talking: "I don't live here for free. I have to work, just like everyone else.

"Although my uncle gave me enough liberty to build a cottage, I shouldn't take advantage of his hospitality. As my wife, you should act in the same manner."

Rachel didn't like how her husband was talking to her, especially as she'd been trying her best to get things done right.

She was tired of the tension between her and Daniel, the way Travis expected her to work all day, and staying on the ranch all week.

Most of all, she hated not being seen as good enough by her husband and his uncle.

"I've tried my best, but you're not satisfied," she said with her head down.

"Rachel," Daniel said.

She could hear the concern in his voice, but she didn't feel like listening to him anymore.

There was no point having conversations with her husband every night if he would just keep complaining. That would definitely not make him love her more.

She stood up and started walking out of the room.

"Rachel," he called again, but she didn't look back.

"Rachel," Daniel called her again, but she'd already left with the lamp.

He sat up on the bed and pains shot through his back. He gritted his teeth, waiting for it to subside.

He felt partially responsible for the ache he was feeling. In the afternoon, he'd been distracted by Travis's complaints about Rachel for a few minutes.

Unfortunately, an agitated cow had chosen that moment to charge at him. By the time he'd realized the animal was coming at him, it was already too close.

He turned in time, saving himself from a headbutt, but the cow still slammed into his shoulder and back. The impact had pushed him to the ground, where he'd landed painfully.

George immediately went to call the doctor but came back to tell them that the man wasn't around and would arrive the next morning. Daniel didn't know if he'd broken any bone, so he decided to rest till the following day, hoping the pain would decrease.

Different people had trooped in and out of the living room to help him out while Rachel slept, yet she hadn't woken up. The fact that his wife had slept throughout the event irked him and confirmed Travis's statement about her laziness.

Daniel had planned to explain everything to her softly when she was finally awake, but he tried to hide the pain and spoke more harshly than he'd intended.

He stood up and groped in the dark, aiming to go and talk to her. His legs hit the stool and he tripped, shoulders hitting the shelf as he fell to the floor.

"Rachel!" he shouted.

Footsteps marched to the door, and it flew open. "What do you wa—" Rachel gasped and rushed to him. "What happened?"

"I fell," he managed to say.

With Rachel's help, Daniel stood up and lay back on the bed.

As softly as he could, he told her all that had happened while she slept—Travis's perception of her and the incident with the cow.

But his aching muscles made his head, shoulders, and back throb. In between his sentences, he writhed in agony.

Rachel tried to soothe his pain. She explained how tired she'd been after cleaning the chicken coop and told him that they should have woken her up.

After a while, she placed a hand on his shoulder. "Do you have any salve? I can do something to ease the pain."

She smiled shyly. "I want to give you a massage. It's something I saw my ma do to my pa whenever he came back from the sea and his shoulders hurt."

He shook his head. "No, the salve in the bottle finished before you came. The doctor wasn't around when George went to call him. He'll be arriving in the morning."

"What about oil?"

"We don't have any, except the oil Adeline uses to cook."

Her face lit up with a smile. “I’ve seen different kinds of oil in the kitchen. I know just the right mixture that will help with your pain,” she promised as she stood up to leave.

When she got back from the kitchen with the mixed oil, she removed his shirt and began to massage his neck. Then she worked on his shoulders and back, unknotting the muscles.

As she worked, Daniel felt intense relief. Most of the pain dissipated, and his body began to relax.

During that time, he thought about Travis and Rachel. His uncle was an impatient man. When he wanted to get things done, he wanted them done at that moment.

He didn't like teaching people and expected them to know how to complete a task whether they were beginners or not.

Rachel, on the other hand, hadn't grown up on a ranch. She'd never even been on one until now. She was used to a different lifestyle and needed time to adjust.

Unlike him and Travis, who had been farming and rearing animals for decades, she had a short period to prove herself. Daniel understood the tension that could create.

Besides, Rachel had tried to work that day. She might not be as fast or as good as more experienced hands her age, but she was putting in the required effort.

Most importantly, she'd helped ease his pain. She was caring and sensitive to his needs.

As the massage helped the ache and throbbing to subside, Daniel imagined Rachel touching him more intimately. Warmth spread through his body at the thought.

He shook his head, forcing himself to concentrate on other things—he

needed to sell some eggs and a calf or two. They'd not sheared the sheep yet this year.

Although they had harvested the parsnips, carrots, radishes, lettuces, and onions from the vegetable garden, they didn't cultivate any more crops. Yet, spring would soon draw to a close.

The garden was close to the cottage. The proximity was a good enough reason for him to cultivate more crops than before, but he hadn't. What had he been doing all year?

He'd been so focused on building his cottage and getting a wife that he had become negligent in his duties. He closed his eyes and promised himself that he would do something about it soon.

He told himself he wouldn't think about Rachel, begged his mind not to focus on the massage that was not only soothing his pain but was sending sensations coursing through his body.

He failed woefully. He wanted her to be by his side, to feel her warmth as they slept on the same bed.

He remembered that he'd told her to take her time, to only sleep in the same room with him when she became comfortable enough.

He'd done that for Rachel. But now that several emotions were warring within him, Daniel half-regretted what he'd said.

By the time his wife completed the massage and left the room, he felt colder than usual. It was the kind of cold that covering himself with a blanket wouldn't stop.

The only person who had the power to make him warm had left the room.



The next day, Daniel slept in and awoke only when the doctor arrived

at the ranch and gave him some medication. The doctor told him that no bone was broken and advised him to stay in bed for the rest of the day so his body would heal.

But by afternoon, he was restless. He left the cottage, mounted a horse, and rode around the field.

As he neared the chicken coop, he saw Rachel gathering eggs. Memories of the feel of her hands on his back flooded his mind.

He longed for her touch and hoped it would turn into something more. He watched her, admiring the movement of her hips as she moved around.

She looked up at him and blushed. Just then, some eggs fell from her hand and splattered on the floor. She quickly tried to clean up the mess.

In the process, another egg broke.

Daniel looked around, hoping that his uncle was far off, but he was close by and glaring at the broken eggs. Once their eyes met, Travis looked away.

Just then, he saw Adeline rushing toward the chicken coop. Had she also seen the eggs break? He checked if Bernard and George had witnessed Rachel's awkwardness, but they were busy at another part of the field.

He exhaled in relief when Adeline started helping Rachel to gather the eggs.

He hoped she would teach Rachel how to carry out her tasks effectively even when she was nervous and that his wife would learn quickly.

That way, there would be no need for Travis's scowl of disapproval.

The sooner it happened, the better for everyone, Daniel thought. He didn't know how much more of his uncle's scrutiny and displeasure he could endure before reacting.

Rachel was still fidgeting when she heard the dreadful sound of another egg breaking. She didn't dare bend down and count how many she'd broken.

Were they ten, a dozen, or more? She wouldn't try to find out, not when her husband and his uncle were staring at her like she'd killed one of the cows on the ranch.

She was grateful Adeline was now helping her pick the eggs. She turned her back to them, cleaned up the broken pieces, and pretended to examine one of the chickens.

Soon, he'll leave, she thought as she tried to calm her nerves.

For the first time, she wasn't bothered about what Travis thought. Instead, she wanted Daniel to move away from where he stood, staring at her.

His presence had been the cause of her clumsiness. Since he arrived in front of the chicken coop on his horse, she hadn't been able to concentrate.

She kept visualizing him lying on the bed shirtless, just like yesterday.

She hadn't known that massaging him would be so distracting. As her hands kneaded his shoulders and back, alternating between hard muscles and soft flesh, she'd made a considerable effort to listen to what he was saying. She had only been partially successful.

Unable to sleep afterward, she'd thought of him late into the night. She had even gone to his room early in the morning while he slept and placed her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat as he grunted and wrapped his arm around her.

Then, she'd felt a sensation in her stomach as if a million butterflies were fluttering inside her. Her heartbeat had increased dramatically, and embarrassing images had crystallized in her mind.

And the images hadn't stopped since.

No matter how hard she tried, her mind had decided what to think about her husband and it couldn't be stopped. Her body had followed suit, choosing to humiliate her with shaking hands, clumsiness, and by breaking eggs she was supposed to hold tightly.

She'd only seen his bare body, felt it with her fingers, and she was thinking in this manner. What would happen if he were to massage her instead?

Her heart pounded in her chest as new images formed in her mind.

She shook off the thought. She wouldn't think of it, not when she still had work to do and she was very tired.

She'd woken up very early and cleaned the paddock. Then, she had cleared up the barn as much as she could. Like the field, the place had been filled with manure.

While cleaning, her right foot had sunk into soft dung and started itching immediately. She ran out of the barn, chiding herself for not wearing boots or an apron and scarf to protect her clothes and hair.

After she'd washed her foot and donned the right apparel, she cleaned up the mess her foot had made.

By the time Adeline had called her for breakfast, she was both famished and fatigued. Eating hadn't solved her problem; she hadn't

taken the time to savor the delicious meal, and she'd still felt tired and hungry after wolfing it down.

She didn't want to compound it by feeling nervous due to Daniel's presence.

A tap on her shoulder startled her.

She lifted her eyes, thinking it was Daniel. When she saw it was Adeline, she heaved a sigh of relief.

"They've left," the older woman said, brushing her salt and pepper hair out of her face with her hands.

Rachel looked up to see Daniel with the ranch hands. Travis had left the field.

"Thank you."

A small smile formed on Adeline's lips. "Now you won't break any more eggs."

"When Uncle Travis kept staring at me, I became nervous and couldn't concentrate anymore," she said in a rush. "I'm afraid he won't find my work satisfactory."

The housekeeper gave her a knowing look. "What about when your husband was staring at you?"

Heat rushed to Rachel's face, and the older woman laughed.

"You look so innocent when you blush."

Rachel said nothing to that. She looked around, but there were no more eggs to pick. She decided to clean up the coop before moving on to the next task.

Since she'd cleaned it the previous day, there wasn't much of a mess.

Still, she picked up a shovel and cleared the dirt, feathers, and bird droppings that were there.

She carefully packed them in one corner while Adeline took the droppings to an area marked off for planting and the dirt to a portion of the farm used for refuse.

Rachel was grateful for the housekeeper's help. Adeline had been nothing but kind to her since she arrived. Rachel glanced at her. She'd sometimes wondered about the older woman.

Was she related to Travis? Was she widowed? At first, she'd thought Adeline was Travis's wife, but it hadn't taken long to realize that wasn't the case.

Rachel didn't know anything about Adeline, other than the fact that she was the housekeeper, and she didn't want to pry.

She glanced around the chicken coop. It was clean. Now that she'd completed more tasks than she had the previous day, she wondered if Travis would be happier with her.

But then, he'd seen her cleaning out the barn and paddock, and he'd still worn a frown.

She didn't think she could please her husband's uncle no matter how hard she tried. She felt he would find some fault or just give her more chores to do.

She decided to tell Adeline what was on her mind, but first, she wanted to garner more information about her husband and the ranch hands.

She asked the older woman about Daniel, Bernard, and George. Then she broached the subject of Travis's attitude toward her.

"Travis doesn't like me," she said as they cleaned the troughs and water pails and put feed and water in them. "I think he wants to

discredit me before my husband.”

“Why do you say so?” Adeline asked.

Rachel went on to tell her what had happened the day before. By the time she’d finished speaking, Adeline’s face was contorted in anger.

The older woman gripped her arm and started pulling her out.

"I'm going to tell Travis exactly what I think about his giving you all that chores to complete in one day. He had the nerve to complain about your being lazy after that, too.

“I'm going to give him a piece of my mind. Doesn't he know that you're a new bride who came from New York?”

Rachel tried to stop Adeline, but the woman was stronger and was successfully dragging her to Travis's house. She looked around, mortified.

The scene had already piqued the interest of the ranch hands. Soon, Daniel would look in her direction.

"Stop," she said in a panic, but the housekeeper kept ranting.

"How does he expect you to acclimatize to the ranch like an experienced ranch hand suddenly? Even if you grew up on a farm, why should you do all those chores? What does he employ George and Bernard for?"

Rachel had to stop Adeline from going to Travis, or worse things would come from it. She planted her feet firmly on the ground and tugged her arm from the housekeeper's hold.

“Stop! I don’t want to go and see him.”

A look of confusion passed across Adeline’s face. “But I’m trying to help you.”

"I know. But he's my husband's uncle, and he has become my uncle, too. I have to deal with him softly so he doesn't end up hating me.

"I need to woo him by doing what he wants; then, he can accept me," she explained.

Adeline shook her head. "Travis will never stop treating you like a housefly if you act like a weakling around him. He'll either ignore you or hit you harder, which is the same treatment given to houseflies."

"He'll change."

"He won't. You need to be tough with him; that's the only language he understands." She paused, thinking.

"You don't need to be tough with him if you don't want to—let me be the tough one. Let me talk to him sternly, and he'll change his mind about you, or at least give you more feminine tasks that won't roughen your hands and darken your fair skin.

"He can assign you to cook or clean only inside the house," she said thoughtfully. "Yes, that's what I'll tell him to do."

Rachel's heart beat faster. She could feel her lips trembling as she stepped away from Adeline. "I don't want to cook. Don't be tough with him."

Adeline held her hands, her face compassionate.

"Cooking will also give you the chance to win his heart softly. Travis likes elaborate meals and exquisite dishes. Sometimes, you can prepare a feast and invite people.

"At other times, you can make something simple yet rich in taste and quality. If you do that, he won't have any other choice but to love you and accept you as his daughter-in-law."

But the horror Rachel felt kept growing. Except for boiling eggs and

rice and warming milk, she couldn't cook to save her life.

She shook her head vigorously, oblivious to her environment or who was watching her.

"I can't, I don't know how. I can't cook."

Adeline didn't speak for a few seconds. Then she only uttered one word: "How?"

Rachel shook her head again. "One day, I'll tell you."

She liked Adeline. She appreciated how the woman treated her with love and kindness, but she wasn't yet ready to open up to her.

Adeline nodded and hugged her.

"I understand. No one is perfect. We all have our shortcomings, and this is yours.

"But as long as you're ready to improve on yourself and work toward a happy marriage, that's what matters," she said, patting her back. "And know that I'm here when you need someone to talk to."

She smiled mischievously and whispered in Rachel's ear. "I can give you special female advice about your husband in the bedroom, too."

For the second time that afternoon, heat rose in Rachel's cheeks. A feeling she knew food wouldn't satisfy settled in her stomach. "I... I... Thank you."

"Don't worry. I'll teach you to cook."

Rachel nodded, grateful for the affection Adeline was showing her. She hugged her, saying, "Thank you for the food yesterday. Thank you for everything."

But then a shadow fell across the part of the field where she was

standing. She looked up to see Travis walking toward her, and her mood was dampened.

“It’s good that I found both of you here,” he said, smiling.

Rachel looked at him suspiciously; she didn’t care for the smile on his face.

He turned to her. "Since you eagerly offered to do as many chores as you can, I've been thinking about what else to assign to you. Even though you've not yet cleaned my house, I think this new task will be more suitable for you."

“What task?” Rachel asked.

"I'd like you to cook for us for one day," he said. "I just realized I've never tasted any meal you've made."

“How will I know you'll be able to feed Daniel and the children you plan to have properly if you don't cook for me? You'll cook without Adeline's help, of course."

Rachel's heart plummeted. After a few seconds, a plan began to form in her head and she smiled slightly.

“All right. That won’t be a problem. I’ll cook next week,” she said, hoping to learn enough from Adeline before then.

But Travis’s smile turned into a condescending sneer.

“Why should we wait till next week to taste your delectable food? You want to make a sumptuous meal for your husband, don’t you?”

“When... when do you want me to cook?” she stammered.

“Tomorrow.”

As Travis walked back to his house, Rachel wondered if he'd heard the

conversation between her and the housekeeper. Adeline had certainly been shouting, and she couldn't remember if she'd raised her voice, too.

Well, he'd already asked her to cook, and she had no clue what to do.

She looked at Adeline in alarm. "What do I do?"

"He asked you to cook tomorrow, didn't he?" the older woman asked.

She nodded meekly.

"Then we start preparing the meal today. Tomorrow, you'll only have a few things to do. You'll prepare chicken and salad.

"I'll help you cook part of it tonight," Adeline told her. "Then you'll complete it tomorrow, and the food will be delicious."

Rachel smiled despite the trepidation that had filled her. Adeline's plan was better than her cooking everything alone.

Still, she was afraid that she'd ruin all the effort the housekeeper would put in. She could make the food bitter with her ineptitude—or worse, she could cook rubbish.

Daniel had already told her to start pulling her weight on the ranch. He'd also complained that they didn't live there for free.

She needed to be good at something, so everyone would see she was contributing handsomely.

Rachel prayed the food would be delicious. She didn't want her husband to stop living here; neither did she want to be forced to leave Hickman Ranch if all her efforts proved she wasn't useful.

She had already left New York and hadn't heard from her aunt or her father. She could always go back to Charlotte, but she wasn't sure she could bear the shame of going all the way back to Rochester to live

with her friend's family after gleefully saying goodbye to the place.

Would Travis send her away if she couldn't cook good food or couldn't prepare a meal when she was asked to?

She didn't put it past him.

Daniel woke up at dawn the next morning full of life and with hardly any pain.

Rachel had rubbed the salve on his shoulders and back the previous night, and he'd enjoyed every bit of it. Today, he would use his hands to work instead of just moving around the ranch and looking at others doing their chores.

Daniel preferred working to supervising Bernard and George. Ranching was good, honest work—unlike overseeing the ranch hands, which involved only walking and riding around the field.

His idea of supervising was different. He joined the ranch hands to complete any task they were assigned.

He loved to show them what to do, and then they would repeat the task. In this way, he kept teaching them as they gained expertise.

He stretched, bathed quickly, and dressed eagerly.

They were going to start shearing the sheep today. Most of them had overgrown wool over their eyes, which made them clumsy.

Shearing was a task Daniel was fond of. He could rub the sheep's belly and talk to them while cutting off the woolen fleece.

The shearing was necessary so the animals wouldn't overheat during the coming summer, and it would be easier to discover pests that had

made the warm skin a habitat.

Besides, the fleece would fetch a higher price since most people sheared sheep and sold off the wool in early spring. He'd decided to use the money to buy several piles of hay.

He was glad his mistake would be profitable for the farm and hoped the hay would last till the end of the winter season the next year.

He left the cottage, deciding to check up on Rachel after daybreak. She'd put in so much effort the previous day and was probably tired and asleep.

He walked to the section of the barn where the sheep were kept to find Bernard and George were already going into the building. They had to start the task early so they could work on the vegetable garden before herding the cattle to the field to feed.

They would plow and section off different parts of the land to plant melons, squashes, cucumbers, and pumpkins. Daniel hoped that one day, Rachel would take charge of the gardening.

As he walked past the kitchen, the smell of burning food wafted out from the door. He stopped, confused.

He'd only smelled burnt food once since Adeline started cooking for them. That day, she'd been angry at something Travis said.

He remembered that he'd seen her, Rachel, and Travis the previous day. He'd noticed an altercation between Adeline and his wife, but he hadn't paid much attention to it because he believed the women would work things out.

But now that the breakfast he would eat was burning, he wasn't sure they had reconciled.

He walked into the kitchen, calling for the housekeeper, but Adeline was nowhere to be found. Instead, his wife was darting from one part

of the kitchen to the other.

The room was in disarray. Cut vegetables were on the counter, and there were several cutleries and utensils strewn on the chair and cupboards.

He walked to the two cast iron stoves by the fireplace and opened the pots on them. Each contained burning food.

One had burning beans; another had horrible smelling stew that had equally burned. Another pot had boiled eggs in it, but the water had dried up and the eggs were stuck to the bottom.

Shocked, he took a cloth and removed the pots from the heat. He opened the egg pot and picked up one egg, examining the cracked shell whose surface was now black with patches of chocolate brown instead of its normal color.

"Who burns boiled eggs? How does that happen?" he said, voice rising.

Rachel's face crumpled and Daniel shut his mouth. His wife was sensitive. He concentrated on removing the shell. The egg inside was rubbery and overcooked.

"How long did you cook this?" he asked.

"Since I came into the kitchen. I forgot about it, and it got burnt."

He heaved a sigh, running his hands through his hair. The egg was ruined. The stew and beans she'd been cooking were, too.

He wasn't sure how Uncle Travis would take this loss. First, she'd broken several eggs the previous day. Now, she had burned food.

Although he was angry about this new development, Daniel didn't want to say anything that could hurt his wife. He sat on a chair and watched her run around frantically.

From her actions, it was easy to deduce that she couldn't cook. Obviously, she wouldn't be able to cook any meal for him; she would just burn everything.

Now that he thought of it, what exactly could she do? The feeble attempts she made at cleaning didn't make the place much cleaner.

He cleaned his room himself, and he hadn't entered her room ever since her arrival because he wanted to give her privacy.

But he could guess how clean it was from the state of the barn the previous day; a large section of the barn was still dirty, and the clean part had footprints of dung. The only place that had looked better was the chicken coop Adeline assisted her with.

Why hadn't she told him that she couldn't do anything? She could have been honest from the start about what skills she could offer.

Cooking was a basic skill and shouldn't be a problem for her as a woman. But since she couldn't cook, she should have mentioned it in her letters. Then, he would have braced himself.

But she'd simply written that although she'd never worked on a ranch before, she was hardworking and could help in some other way.

Daniel felt distrust taking root in his heart.

What exactly had Rachel expected to come and do here? Had she been looking for a man to depend on and marry without contributing her share?

He was becoming increasingly exasperated with the situation, but he kept his mouth shut and stared into thin air.

"Daniel," Rachel said, coming to sit beside him, "what's wrong?"

He sighed again. "You were not forthright with me in your letters. Why didn't you tell me that you couldn't cook or clean?"

"I can clean," she said in an argumentative tone. She paused and turned to him. "I'm sorry I can't."

She sighed, then began to explain. "I don't know how to do most of the ranch chores because I've never been on one before now. I'm trying my best to learn."

"I've gained knowledge by asking everyone questions, and now I've started working as you asked me to," she pointed out.

"I don't know how to cook because of how I grew up. By the time I was ready to learn, the misfortune had befallen my family and we had to move to a boarding house that cooked and cleaned for us."

"So, what can you do, then?"

Her face lit up with a smile.

"I can sew excellently. I love to make clothes, curtains, anything that can be sewn. I need some sewing supplies before I'd be able to achieve anything, though."

Daniel began to picture how their cottage would look when Rachel sewed everything it needed. It would be more warm and welcoming, he presumed.

He wanted to sleep in a room that felt more like home.

His wife had never lied to him, so he believed she would be quite good at sewing. What did it matter if she didn't know how to do ranch work or couldn't cook and clean?

As long as she was good in two or more things, that was fine by him.

She could massage quite well, and she'd stated that she could sew—one task would benefit him personally, and the other would be helpful on the ranch.

He was ready to teach her every other thing she didn't know if she was willing to learn. For today, Bernard and George would shear the sheep.

They were experienced enough. Besides, his wife needed his attention.

He held her hand and stood up. When she followed suit, he put the other hand on her back and brought her body close to his. Her breath hitched.

Her musky scent that had become more flowery since she arrived at Hickman Ranch was stronger. He put his fingers on her cheeks, stroking it where it had started to turn red.

“Do you want me to teach you?”

“Teach me, please,” she replied, resting her head on his chest.

They stayed that way for a while, warming each other up.

Then, they began to cook. Rachel had planned to prepare chicken and salad with beans and stew. There was no time to start preparing that kind of meal anymore.

However, the chicken was already stuffed—he suspected that was the handwork of Adeline—so he put it on the fire. Then, Rachel boiled eggs to add to the salad.

This time around, they didn't burn.

Daniel decided to recreate his favorite childhood meal for Rachel—pancakes, sausages, and fried eggs. There was salted beef sausage and flour in the pantry.

He showed his wife the quantity of seasoning to add and how to fry the meat.

While she fried, he mixed the flour with a little sugar and baking

powder. Then he whipped some eggs and added them into the mixture. He poured in some milk and oil, turning everything into a smooth paste.

He went on to fry the pancakes in another pan while he showed Rachel how to fry scrambled eggs.

Daniel remembered his mother teaching him and Rose how to cook when he was younger. He smiled at the memory.

Now, he would be able to pass that knowledge to his wife. That was what family members did.

When the food was ready, Rachel hugged him, laughing. "Thank you. We did it."

She stepped back to come out from the embrace, but he didn't let go of her waist. Without any further thought, his arms moved to her back and guided her closer till her body was pressed to his.

Her chest rose up and down in an extremely distracting manner. Her pupils were dilated, her lips slightly open as if they were inviting him in.

He'd been wanting to feel those lips, dreaming of it. When she'd come into the room and lay her head on his chest before dawn, he had wanted to touch them.

She hadn't been nervous when she came in, so he'd surmised that it wasn't her first time.

He'd wondered what it would feel like to touch her pink lips, to kiss her. Then he'd promised himself that the next time, he wouldn't stop at wrapping his arm around her and pretending to sleep.

Now was his chance.

His thumb traced her lower lip and slowly moved to her upper lip.

Her eyes widened, and he smiled, bending toward her.

She closed her eyes, lips turning up a little. His lips grazed hers.

The sound of pot lids opening and closing made him realize he and Rachel weren't alone in the kitchen. Rachel jumped away from him with a frightened look.

As he turned, frowning at the intruder, he saw his uncle looking into the pot of burned eggs.

"I guess breakfast is ready," Travis said.

“W*hen you get too emotional, control yourself. Don't let your emotions control you, and you won't make mistakes.”*

That was what Rachel's mother had told her when she was ten. She'd obeyed her ma by counting things and literally taking one step at a time.

Today, she needed to follow that advice to the letter as her hands shook and her imagination went wild.

Travis would surely send her away now that he'd seen what a horrible cook she was. No, they would all tell her to pack her bag and leave for New York.

She could envision how she would be sent from the ranch disgracefully.

Rachel felt dread settle at the pit of her stomach and bit her lips to control herself.

Travis still stood close to the pot, a smirk on his face. Then he left the kitchen, a bounce in his steps. Daniel, who had been looking between her and his uncle, followed him out.

Rachel held the counter and closed her eyes. She breathed in and out several times until she'd calmed somewhat.

She looked around. She needed to manage the situation and find a

way out.

Bernard, George, and Travis were talking in the dining room. Travis's voice sounded happy, laughing boisterously on occasion. Daniel was quiet, too quiet.

Adeline rushed into the kitchen. "I overslept. I woke up early, but then I chose to get a wink of sleep and slept much longer. Did you encounter any problem?"

Rachel nodded.

The older woman looked at the food arranged on trays and in big bowls and smiled.

"You've done it. I knew you would prepare a fine meal for us." She walked to the pots and opened them.

When she saw the burnt food, her face fell and she exclaimed, "Oh dear, oh dear. You'll learn, child. It's only a matter of time."

She put the unburned part of the stew and beans into new pots. She scraped off the bottom and poured the burnt food and eggs into a sack, which she took out.

Now that Adeline had taken care of the burnt food, Rachel turned to the food in the tray. She had to face Daniel's uncle; there was no way to avoid it.

"One step at a time," she muttered. "Count things, Rachel."

She took one step at a time, holding the tray containing more than twenty sticks of sausages. She put them on the dining table, avoiding looking directly at anybody's face.

She proceeded to carry the rest of the food out. By the time she and Adeline finished serving, her hands were no longer shaking and she could look at everyone.

Despite the appetizing aroma of the food and the flavorful sausage, they ate breakfast in an uncomfortable atmosphere. To Rachel, the clinking of the cutlery was only warning her of impending doom.

The ranch hands kept looking at her and Daniel, then at Travis. Travis acted oblivious to the situation and ate his food with relish.

When he was through, he drank some water and said to her, "Thanks for the meal, Rachel.

"I would have said that you're a great cook, but the pancakes, sausages, and eggs taste like Daniel's. The chicken tastes like Adeline's. Perhaps they prepared them for you before instructing you on how to cook them."

She opened her mouth to answer him but was at a loss for words. She shut it, and Travis continued with a flourish.

"I made a fascinating discovery today, " he said with a booming voice. "Rachel can't cook."

Bernard and George were listening to him with rapt attention while Adeline's spoon of salad was halfway between the plate and her mouth, her jaw open in shock.

"She's a horrible cook and can't even boil an egg," he said, fishing out one of the burnt eggs from a small leather pouch he carried and tossing the black and brown mass to Bernard.

The ranch hands examined the egg, then looked at Rachel like she wasn't human.

"Not only is she a horrible cook, she can't clean. Look at how horrible the barn looked. You boys did reclean it, didn't you?"

Bernard nodded. George stared back at his employer.

Adeline was no longer eating; her hands were crossed over her chest,

a scowl firmly planted on her face as she stared at Travis in disgust.

A storm was brewing on Daniel's face. He glared at his uncle, fists clenched on the table.

"She wastes resources—burning beans, stew, and eggs. She's lazy and can't complete any task properly," Travis continued, seemingly oblivious to the reactions of the others.

"It turns out that our dearly beloved can only do chores properly when someone is assisting her. For example, this meal here was prepared by Daniel—what would we have eaten if Danny hadn't come to the rescue?"

Rachel waited with bated breath as silence fell on the dining room. Daniel unclenched his fist. One side of his lips turned up in a smirk; his eyes blazed in anger.

A clap sounded in the room—once, twice, thrice.

"Is that all you've got, Uncle Travis? I must say, you put up an excellent performance."

His voice sounded calm yet threatening, like when it hadn't rained for days before a storm. Travis watched him for a few seconds that felt like several days had passed.

Rachel's hands started shaking; her eyes were quickly filling with tears. She blinked them back rapidly.

"I won't have you talk to me like that, Daniel," Travis said quietly.

"You deserve it, *sir*. Did you consider that she's new and nervous? You expect her to know how to do everything with expertise suddenly?"

"Stop breathing down her neck, Uncle. Leave her to learn at her own pace."

“Does she need to learn to cook and clean, also? What has she been doing with her life that she doesn’t know how to do simple chores? And how long do you expect me to wait for her to learn at her own pace?”

Rachel put her hands over her ears, wishing she weren't present listening to the two men. There was no way this argument would end well.

Both parties would either end up having bad feelings about each other or end up quarreling for years. They needed to stop now before things escalated.

“Please stop,” she begged, her voice barely coming out in a whisper.

But they didn't stop. Daniel continued arguing in her favor, and Travis countered every point he made. The ranch hands sat watching.

Adeline tried to drag Daniel out, but he didn't bulge. She shook her head with a disappointed look.

Tears were now running freely down Rachel’s face. Her efforts to end this had proved futile.

"Stop." Her voice was more assertive this time. “Stop!”

They didn’t spare her a glance.

"Looking at you now, I can only wonder how you would have acted toward Caroline. Would you have treated her nicely or as despicably as you're treating Rachel?" Daniel mocked.

Travis banged a fist on the table and stood up in a fury. "You won't talk about Caroline in that manner. You won't mention her with contempt again. I won't tolerate it."

Daniel stood up, dwarfing the much shorter man. “And you won’t talk about my wife in that manner. It’s unacceptable.”

“Never, ever dishonor the memory of Caroline. Never!”

Travis stared Daniel down even though his head only reached his nephew's chin. He took several breaths, schooling his face into calm fury. Daniel watched him, eyebrow raised.

Rachel sobbed and sniffed. She was the cause of all this; they were squabbling because of her shortcomings.

Everything Travis had pointed out was correct. She'd wasted food and resources, and she could understand why he would be angry about that.

Daniel was defending her as her husband, yet things didn't feel right. Her actions were causing a rift between her husband and his uncle, and such things never ended well.

Something similar had happened with her pa's family. They'd never liked her mother. They said she was too poor for him and he should marry within his class.

But they had tolerated her, hadn't they? At least, they'd pretended to be cordial until that fateful day when her father and grandparents had a disagreement.

It had started as a simple argument and erupted into a full-blown quarrel. Then Steven's family cut off all communication.

When her Pa had lost his merchandise and traveled to Texas, he hadn't bothered to tell his parents because they hadn't spoken for years.

And when she and Lily were thrown out of their home, his family had pretended they didn't exist. They didn't even offer Rachel and her ma accommodation.

Rachel couldn't let that happen to her again. She couldn't bear that sort of trauma anymore. She'd always wanted a peaceful, loving family, not what was unfolding before her.

She couldn't live in a family filled with troubles. She had to leave Hickman Ranch.

Going to Rochester was her only option. Charlotte would certainly accommodate her and could convince Eric to give her the sewing job she'd had at Louis Landal.

Anything would be better than staying under this constant pressure that always ended negatively.

She stood up, tears still pouring from her eyes. As she moved to the door, they resumed their argument, each man trying to get in the last word of authority.

"You were very disrespectful today, Daniel," Travis said, washing his hand in a bowl. "You're not allowed to behave like that on my ranch."

Daniel laughed. "Of course, it's the rules of your ranch. And one day, I'll leave this place if I can't bear them anymore."

The last thing Rachel heard before she closed the door was Travis's solemn voice. "You still don't regard me as a father after all these years. It's pitiful."

With that, the door closed and Rachel ran to the cottage, where she intended to pack her things and leave Hickman Ranch's hellish tension.

Daniel was still boiling with anger by the time the door banged close. As he seethed, Adeline packed up the plates, muttering.

Just before she entered the kitchen, she said, "I'm very disappointed in you two, especially you, Daniel. You could have handled this in a better way."

Daniel stormed out of the dining room. All he cared about at the moment was seeing how his wife was doing.

Couldn't Travis comprehend that Rachel had left everything she had in New York to come to Fort Worth and be his wife?

She was trying her best, even though she seemed to be more of a liability at the moment. But teaching her how things worked would change that.

Travis should have been gentle with her, not harsh.

Daniel's parents would have done things differently. They would have ignored Rachel's mistakes and somehow made it fun for her to learn, but they were not here to do that.

He remembered the feel of her soft hands on his back and how that had been instrumental to his pain dissipating quickly, as opposed to his lying in bed for several days.

He remembered the nervous shaking of her hands when he was close

by, her smile, the sound of her laughter, her irresistible scent, the moment they'd had in the kitchen that his uncle had interrupted.

Rachel had a pleasant soul. She'd been so distraught that she had cried when he was arguing with Travis. He needed to console her.

He walked up to the cottage to find the front door was ajar.

"Rachel," he called, going to her room.

As he entered, he took in the sight. Rachel's box was on the bed, and she was furiously folding her clothes and throwing them in.

He didn't want her to leave; he enjoyed having her as a wife. He called her name again, but she just looked up at him, silently crying.

He sat down beside her and hugged her, letting her cry into his chest. Then, he cleaned her tears with his hands.

"I'm sorry we upset you," he said. "Don't leave on that account and I'll make it up to you."

She shook her head and pushed him away. "Is this how you act here? You were disrespectful to Uncle Travis."

He barked a dry laugh. "I was defending you."

"Yes, you were, and I'm happy that you stood by me. But that doesn't mean you should talk to him that way."

Her actions endeared him to her. Despite how Travis had been treating Rachel, she was still looking out for him, reprimanding Daniel for talking to Travis harshly simply because he was his nephew.

In Daniel's mind, it made the stubborn set of her jaw and the hair tendril over her eyes look pretty. He brushed away the hair and put it behind her ears.

"Who is Caroline?" she asked.

"Travis's betrothed. She died in the fire I told you about in the letters."

She looked at him in shock. "And you used it against him in an argument? That's mean. You need to apologize to him."

Daniel didn't answer. He held her and drew her closer.

She shook her head again. "Please apologize to him."

Daniel still didn't say anything. He placed Rachel's head on his chest.

But somewhere inside him, he wondered if apologizing to Travis was proper when Travis had been harassing Daniel's wife.



In the afternoon, Daniel hitched a wagon and took Rachel to town as he went to purchase some supplies. She'd been clamoring to see outside Hickman's Ranch, and he felt this was a perfect opportunity to do so.

Going to different places, having new experiences, and talking to the townsfolk would uplift her mood.

They first went to the bakery, where they bought bread and other baked goods. Rachel ate some hot buns and a cupcake with a strawberry topping.

She licked her lips with delight thereafter. On noticing how she enthusiastically ate the cake, Logan gave her a few free cupcakes to take home.

After that, they went to the general store. Daniel only needed some nails and whiskey, but Adeline had given him a list of kitchen supplies to purchase.

He handed the list to Rachel while he dropped some eggs with the store hand, Benedict.

Rachel bought everything on the list and added buttons, thread, and needles. He saw her looking longingly at some other materials.

When she'd moved to another section of the store, he took those materials and a sewing machine to the counter. He hoped she would sew beautiful clothes that would soften Travis.

When they'd selected their purchases, Benedict calculated the cost while they talked.

"I hope the recent series of thefts haven't hit your ranch," he said to Daniel.

"What theft?" Daniel asked, eager to know what was happening on the other ranches.

"Some rustlers have been going around the ranches, stealing a sheep here and a cow there. Nobody knows who the thieves are; the animals just mysteriously disappear."

Rachel grew visibly concerned. "There are thieves here?" she said, looking around.

Benedict nodded. "You're new in town, so you might not know. But outlaws come here occasionally to take what's not theirs."

She gasped, placing her hands over her mouth as she turned to Daniel. "How do we handle that? We need to secure the ranch and make it safer for the animals."

"The ranch is safe, Rachel. We've secured it plenty," he said, thinking of the barbed wire.

"Nobody has ever stolen livestock from Hickman Ranch, and they're not going to start now. So, you've got nothing to worry about."

Rachel nodded and relaxed.

Daniel made a mental note to check the property. He had to ensure the fences were still strong and the traps were still working.

They could stay awake in shifts if the thefts got worse at other ranches. But for now, they just needed to tighten their defenses.

They loaded their goods into the wagon. Daniel stopped at the post office on the way back because Rachel wanted to check if anyone had sent her letters.

His wife's cheeks were rosier now, and she had a happier disposition. He was glad she was no longer crying. He hoped she'd forgotten that silly notion of leaving the ranch.

It didn't matter if his uncle opposed her, he would do his best to make her stay.

Thoroughly satisfied that he'd achieved his aim, he pulled on the reins and the horses started moving. Just then, a mass of warm skin hugged him.

"Thank you for buying a sewing machine for me," Rachel said.

He smiled.

She pecked his left and right cheeks, and Daniel felt a longing for her rise within him. He left the reins and let the horses keep moving on their own as he turned to her.

"You're a wonderful woman, Rachel. You might have made some mistakes, but I still want you as my wife as much as I did when you were in New York.

"And don't worry, you'll stop making mistakes soon. We can learn and grow together, you and me, as husband and wife."

Rachel hugged him, her head of blond hair fitting snugly on his shoulder.

“And children,” she said.

“And children,” Daniel repeated.

He could see it already. No matter the difficulties that came their way, they were going to be a happy family.

Joy bubbled within Rachel as they rode to the post office.

Although the day had started horribly, things were panning out well.

She touched the materials, feeling their soft, stretchy, and strong texture while thinking of what to do with them. She would make some curtains for the cottage and the other houses.

She could also make some clothes for her and Daniel. She thought of making clothes for the other people on the ranch but wondered if Travis would accept any of her gifts.

The postmaster asked for her name at the post office, and she told him, stating both her maiden name and her married surname. She had three letters.

Two were from Charlotte and were addressed to Rachel Hickman, while one was addressed to Rachel McAllister. The handwriting of the latter was unfamiliar.

Rachel took all of them and tucked them in her gown.

Then, they rode back to the ranch, where she gave Adeline the goods she'd requested and took her sewing supplies to the cottage.

A few minutes later, she settled on her bed with a cupcake and a glass of milk and opened the first letter. It was from Charlotte.

She updated Rachel about Rochester and the garment sweatshop. She

explained that she and Eric were becoming closer friends, and she hoped he would soon ask her to marry him.

Rachel was happy for her. She went on to read the second letter, which was filled with pages of Charlotte worrying about not getting a response from her.

She quickly penned down a reply, hoping to go to the post office the next day or give anyone leaving the ranch to send for her.

As Rachel felt the last letter, she couldn't help but wonder who had sent it. Strangers didn't typically send letters to others unless in response to an advertisement for such, like in the mail-order bride adverts.

Maybe there was another Rachel McAllister in Fort Worth, and she'd just assumed the letter was hers.

If that was the case, she had to return it to the post office so the rightful owner could claim it. But for now, she needed to know who sent the letter.

She broke the seal, opened the envelope, and unfolded the letter. The first thing that struck her was how untidy the handwriting was, but the next thing she read shocked her.

My dear daughter, the letter began.

My dear daughter? she thought. Who could the letter be from?

Her mother was dead and buried. Her pa had called her Rachy. Her aunt never called her daughter, and Rachel didn't know her father's family's whereabouts, nor did they know hers.

Out of curiosity, she continued. It said:

My dear daughter,

I received your missive with great pleasure.

Before now, I'd sent letters to you. I even sent some when I arrived in Texas, but I got no reply from you or your mother.

Unfortunately, I had a ghastly accident and became incapacitated. So, I had to stop writing.

However, I'm glad you've finally come to Texas in search of me. What a coincidence that I'm also in Fort Worth and would like to meet you as soon as possible, but I am bedridden.

The accident has made me sick for several years, and I cannot walk. This minute, someone is penning down this letter for me.

Oh, Rachel, you must have grown into a lovely woman. I missed your previous letters and didn't know that my beloved wife has passed on.

I wish I had been there. Things would have turned out differently. I'm sorry I wasn't around to help you when you needed it.

But I am here now. I hear there has been some theft on ranches and hope Hickman Ranch is safe. Do ensure to take safety precautions and let me know if you do.

I enjoyed your letter, Rachel, and would love to read more from you. Please send a long letter this time, telling me how you've settled in at the ranch.

Let a bedridden old man have something to look forward to reading when he is idle.

I would love to hear from you again.

Your darling father,

Steven McAllister

After reading the letter, Rachel's heart was thumping harder than it ever had. Her pa had finally sent a reply to her missives. She was ecstatic, overjoyed.

She took the letter and danced around the room, her anger toward him forgotten. Then she read it again and again.

He really missed her and wanted to hear from her. She imagined what it meant to be unable to walk or use one's legs. Did it mean Steven's legs had been amputated?

She'd heard that some of the soldiers who fought in the war had had their limbs cut off. What could her father have done for such a fate to befall him?

But then, maybe his legs were whole and he'd lost feeling in them. She hoped that was what he meant; it was much better than amputation.

It didn't bother Rachel much that Steven couldn't walk, though. At least he wasn't dead. She had her father back; that was what was most important.

Whether he was simply bedridden or lame because he didn't have legs, he was alive!

Her pa hadn't been writing the letter, which explained the strange handwriting. The words sounded a bit different, too.

He hadn't called her Rachy or *my sweet darling*; he hadn't told his hilarious tales. He definitely sounded rough around the edges, unlike the father she knew.

Nevertheless, hardship could change a man. Not everyone enjoyed a good life; some lives were laden with bad experiences. Maybe that was what had happened to Pa.

Even she had started to sound different after being under Travis's tension for so long. What would living in a room and depending on

people for basic things like bathing do to a man?

Well, now that she and Steven had reunited, she would soften him. She would see to it that he visited the ranch, and they would tell each other beautiful tales and forge good memories.

Rachel wondered if she should tell Daniel the good news about finding her father. But after thinking about it briefly, she changed her mind.

With the recent disagreements on the ranch, the news would make her play into Travis's hands.

Travis would tell Daniel that she'd only replied to the mail-order bride advertisement so that he would pay for her ticket to Fort Worth. That was never her intention, but the facts proved otherwise.

More than anything, Rachel didn't want her husband to think badly of her. If she told him alone, he might begin to doubt her true intentions in every situation.

She would rather wait for her father to visit her at the ranch. Yes, that was what she would do. There was no need to cause another dispute.

Instead, she'd keep the letters a secret and encourage her pa to visit. On the day of his arrival, it would be a surprise to Daniel that his father-in-law had been found.

Now that she was sure Steven was safe, Rachel would tell him about her husband. She was sure he would approve and advise her on how to have a love-filled marriage.

She wanted to have a marriage like Steven and Lily's. Although her pa had traveled a lot, he'd adored his wife.

She'd seen her parents' love for each other shining in their eyes when they were together.

Her father was in Texas, so she didn't need to go to New York. More

than ever, she had to remain at Hickman Ranch so that she could keep communicating with him.

Besides, she wanted, needed Daniel. He was a kind, caring man who didn't count her mistakes against her. He was willing to teach her and was always affectionate toward her, even when he was angry.

Rachel wanted her marriage to work. She wanted to get to know more of the man who had stood by her even when his uncle and all other evidence pointed against her.

She loved him, and she wanted him to love her intensely in return.

She'd kissed him on the cheek earlier on and felt a warm sensation in her belly. She wanted more of that—to hug him, hold him, kiss him.

She wanted to hold his hands and run around the field, to have deep discussions with him. She wanted to hear his rich, deep laughter and his singsong voice.

She yearned to live the rest of her life with Daniel—she'd developed a deep liking for her husband amid the troubles. She felt calm and peaceful when he was around, and she longed for his touch and love.

There and then, Rachel decided she would work toward having a great marriage. She wouldn't pack her things at any slight sign of trouble like she'd done earlier.

As long as her husband wanted her to stay, she would remain on Hickman Ranch and make the best of her marriage.

She made a vow to herself that she and Daniel would have the best of marriages, no matter what.

Later that night, Daniel took the whiskey he'd bought from the store and went to Travis's house to apologize.

He didn't think the apology would appear genuine because he still thought his uncle was wrong, and the older man could sniff through lies. However, he had to say sorry because he'd spoken out of turn.

He should have explained his points without shouting and being rude, but he'd gone ahead and done just the opposite. And to cap it off, he'd mentioned Caroline in a negative light.

Anyone who had known Travis long enough could deduce that he hadn't gotten over the death of his betrothed. It had helped cement his intense distrust for women and had ensured that he never pursued marriage again.

He didn't blame Travis. Despite having known Rachel for less than a year, Daniel would likely fall into similar despair as his uncle if she were to die.

He was ashamed of himself as he recalled all he'd said to the older man. He should have been subtle. Now that he was clear-headed, he realized he'd been truly disrespectful.

He'd even thought of, suggested that he leave the ranch when his uncle had no intentions of sending him out. Travis's last words made guilt pierce through his heart:

“You still don’t regard me as a father.”

Maybe the death of his wife-to-be had made his uncle aloof, but he'd also been dealing with grief.

Travis could have been treating him as his son as best as he could, but Daniel had kept comparing him to his pa instead of seeing him as a unique individual.

It had been unfair for Daniel to compare him to his father when his father had more experience with children and didn't constantly remember his partner's death.

Cradling the bottle in his arm, he knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Travis’s gruff voice said.

He took the whiskey into the room, picked some glasses from the cupboard, and served the drinks. The older man peered at the liquor suspiciously while Daniel looked around the room.

Now that he'd thought about how Caroline's death must have affected his uncle, he saw the house in a new light. The walls and furniture were in muted colors, almost as if Travis wanted everything around his house to remain dull and lifeless.

“What do you want, Daniel? What’s the special request or occasion?”

“I want to apologize for speaking out of turn. I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have talked to you in that manner.”

His uncle took a sip of the whiskey and stared into space. “What made you think I would send you away from the ranch?”

He was silent because he didn't have a reason. He'd just assumed that since Travis wasn't his father, he could send Daniel away whenever he wished.

But now he realized Travis needed him as much as he needed his uncle.

"I'll never send you away from the ranch. No matter what you do, you have a place here. I hope you understand that."

Daniel nodded.

"So, get your mind out of that hole. We're family," Travis said, squeezing his shoulder. "And know that everything I do is to protect you and for your best interest."

He smiled but then noticed that his uncle had only talked about him.

"What about Rachel?" he asked.

"She hasn't proven herself yet; she might decide to leave one day."

Daniel understood Travis's statement to mean that he was still finding it hard to accept Rachel. He hoped someday soon his uncle would come to see Rachel's lovely heart and not compare her to Caroline.

For now, all he had to do was watch and wait and protect his wife as best as he could. He decided to start by actively teaching her ranch work.



Before dawn the following morning, rain pelted down from the sky. To Daniel, the rain signified a new beginning; he could start over with Rachel and personally teach her some necessary tasks. That way, Travis would either accept her or be forced to stop his complaints.

He didn't like the squabble that had occurred between him and his uncle, and he didn't want a repeat of that event. The best solution was to solve the problem from the root—his wife's inability to manage tasks properly.

All he needed to do was carve out time to help her learn the ropes. There were several chores he needed to teach her, starting with fieldwork.

First, he would show her how to manage the chicken coop. Then he would teach her to keep a place clean, cook, and hopefully tend the vegetable garden.

Afterward, he could show her how to herd the cattle, goats, and sheep.

However, he didn't want her to ever go near the bovines, and for good reason—they could be dangerous. He didn't want her delicate bones to get broken in an accident.

Daniel knew this project would take a lot of his time. It would mean handing over most of the ranch duties to Bernard and George.

He would just have to trust that they'd complete their tasks each day and take on more work with little supervision. His priority was his wife, and helping her learn would help Hickman Ranch in the long run.

She already knew how to sew, and he'd seen her do laundry excellently once. Her adding this repertoire of ranch tasks would prove to Travis that not all women were like Caroline.

Although Rachel had been a city girl, she could adjust to life on the ranch. She wasn't lazy; she was eager to learn and ready to handle her fair share of the chores.

She just needed to be shown how.

By the time the rain stopped after breakfast, he decided it was high time they started. There was no point in waiting any longer.

Rachel brought a basket from the pantry. Then, they put on their rain boots and trudged to the chicken coop, avoiding puddles and muddy

spots.

Daniel heard a faint cry from the direction of the eastern part of the fence and went to check the cause of the trouble. One of the traps had caught a squirrel, so he took the animal and gave it to the ranch hands.

They would prepare it for Adeline, who would make squirrel stew and greens. He was looking forward to the nutty flavor of the meal during supper.

He came back to an amazing sight at the coop. The daylight was streaming in, illuminating Rachel's wonder-filled face.

She stood, hands crossed behind her back and torso slightly bent toward a hen sitting in a nest. His lips were curved, and he paused at the entrance.

"Oh, my. It's laying an egg," she said as an egg popped out from the hen and fell into the nest.

He could hear the excitement in her voice, see the astonishment on her face as the shell dried.

The birds cackled loudly, each trying to outdo the other. Rachel squealed, and he rushed in on impulse. She stood with her back to him, shaking her head.

Her hand held the leg of a hen that had almost trampled an egg.

"Bad chicken. Bad," she said, carefully putting the leg down.

Daniel's lips twitched. He observed her for a few seconds, resisting the urge to laugh as she scolded the bird.

He enjoyed watching her when she wasn't looking, seeing her brows knit in concentration as she focused on a task, watching the way her eyes lit up as she surveyed the horizon.

He'd known she was beautiful from the minute he laid his eyes on her, but now he couldn't help wondering how a woman could become more and more beautiful each day.

Rachel reached beneath the hen, then snatched her hand back when it tried to peck her. As if sensing his presence, she turned.

She appeared taken aback for an instant, then she regained her composure. "How long have you been standing there?"

Daniel chuckled. "Long enough to feel pity for the poor chicken you just scolded."

She smiled. "Well, I was trying to pick some eggs, and it wouldn't let me."

He moved closer. "Here, let me show you."

He taught her how to pick the eggs from beneath the hens without breaking them and how to handle the fussy birds.

He advised her to collect them twice daily and add enough shavings to the nest so they wouldn't crack, then showed her how to clean the eggs with a dry sponge and store them properly.

Rachel watched and listened with rapt attention as he demonstrated each step. He glanced at her face at regular intervals. She looked so serious that he almost laughed.

When he'd finished showing her what to do, he put an arm across her shoulders and whispered in her ear, "Now, it's your turn to pick and clean the eggs alone."

Her breath hitched and she looked away. She bit her lip, her hands fidgeting. "I can pick them when you're not standing so close."

Daniel grinned, pleased at the effect his touch was having on her.

The flowery scent of her hair wrapped around him. He inhaled her scent, craving her. At that moment, he didn't care about the humid air or the chickens clucking.

He could only see his wife, her smooth, clear, silken skin. He placed his index finger on the back of her neck and caressed it, his hand tingling.

She stiffened; her voice came out in a quiver. "We're meant to be working, not—"

"That's precisely what we're doing," he interrupted. "You need to pick the eggs without any mishap when I'm close by. Or wasn't that the reason why you broke them the other day?"

She ignored him and continued the task with shaking hands. Daniel held her tighter, feeling smug. He'd just been looking for an excuse to touch her, but this style of teaching would make him look forward to being with his wife on the field every day.

He looked up to see Travis walking to the barn. At the same time, Rachel raised her head and moved away from him.

"Is Uncle Travis... have you apologized?" she asked, her eyes filled with worry.

She seemed deeply bothered by his relationship with his uncle. She could have felt many things: anger toward Travis for embarrassing her, or resentment toward him for not accepting her and going out of his way to prove she wasn't good enough.

Instead, all she cared about was the restoration of their relationship. She really did have a gentle heart.

He tucked a few tendrils of hair behind her ear. She smiled lightly at him, her eyes filled with warmth.

"Everything is alright, Rachel. I apologized to him."

She heaved a sigh of relief, and her expression relaxed. "I don't want to come between you. It hurts that he hasn't accepted me, but I keep hoping he will one day."

The sound of a neighing horse distracted her. She hurried toward the entrance, then looked back at him. Her eyes were wide-eyed with excitement, her gaze filled with longing.

"Can I ride one?" she said. "Show me how to ride a horse."

Amid the tension that had arisen since his wife's arrival, Daniel hadn't thought of teaching her how to ride. Now was the time to rectify that.

Lifting the basket containing the eggs, he walked toward her. "You'll need to wear some of my riding clothes."

She nodded eagerly, took the basket from him, and hurried to the pantry. Daniel had half a mind to tell her not to break the eggs, but he decided against it.

If he wanted her to get better at handling tasks, he had to express confidence in her abilities.

She went into the cottage and came out wearing his clothes. They were too big for her, but the shirt was tucked into the pants, a belt held the waist firmly, and the legs were rolled up to make them shorter.

He made a note to get smaller riding outfits for her or ask her to sew some. He led her to the horse section of the large barn, skirting around the cows and bulls grazing in the field.

The place was demarcated into four stalls. Three horses stared at them; Travis had taken the last horse.

As Daniel and his wife went to the second stall where Daisy poked her head out, he missed the smell of fresh hay that usually wafted to his nostrils from the corner of the barn where they stacked them.

The animals had eaten the last pile the previous day. He resolved to go to the mercantile in the afternoon. There, he would sell the fleece and purchase a huge heap of hay.

"This is Daisy," he said, stroking the brown mare fondly.

Rachel reached a hand out hesitantly, then withdrew.

"She doesn't bite."

Holding her, he inched her hand toward the mare. Her hand felt small and smooth in his, the texture a stark contrast to his callused palms.

She stroked the velvety coat slowly. Daniel reached behind the door for an old pail where he kept some fruit treats to give the horses from time to time.

He picked an apple and gave it to Rachel. She held the apple out to Daisy, who promptly chewed on it while she talked to the horse softly.

Watching her, Daniel felt his heart lighten.

She grinned up at him. "I want to mount the horse."

Daniel led Daisy out of the barn. She was the only horse he could use to teach his wife to ride since she wasn't ornery like some of the others. She was intelligent and would be gentle.

He bridled and saddled the horse, then put a stool on her left side so Rachel could climb it before mounting since it was her first time. He adjusted the footholds, then showed her the steps to take.

"You climb on the stool and hold the reins with your left hand, making sure the same hand leans on the saddle horn for support. Meanwhile, put your right hand on the back of the saddle and move closer to the horse.

"Next, place your left foot in the stirrup while facing Daisy's head.

Then swing your right leg over and sit on the saddle before putting your right foot in the right stirrup.

“After that, ensure you’re sitting down comfortably, hold the reins in both hands, and you’re ready to ride.”

He demonstrated how to mount one more time and helped her up. Then he let her climb by herself.

She was still swinging her leg over Daisy when the horse moved forward slightly, and she lost her balance and fell. His arms wrapped around her, preventing her body from hitting the ground.

The proximity of her warm body made him more aware of her, heightening his senses. Her blue eyes captivated him, and his gaze drifted to her mouth. What would her lips taste like?

The desire to kiss her had become like a pounding headache ever since they almost kissed in the kitchen.

Images of bending over her in this manner, lips intertwined, had been crossing his mind—while he was working, while he lay awake on his bed at night, when a cold draft from the window gripped his chest during the early morning rain and he was the only person under the blanket.

Rachel visibly colored, her arms holding tightly to his waist.

Clearing his throat, Daniel cautioned himself. He couldn't kiss her now, no matter how much he wanted to.

He lifted her and watched her try to mount again. When she got it right, she giggled nervously. Daisy started moving and he instructed Rachel to hold the reins tightly.

When the horse started trotting, his wife bounced and flopped awkwardly. Still, laughter bubbled from her throat and she looked at him with shining eyes. “I love this horse!”

At that moment, Travis appeared from the fields. He gave Rachel a cursory glance, held Daniel's gaze for a second, then rode toward the paddocks.

Daniel understood his uncle's unspoken message all too well, but he intended to prove Travis wrong.

Rachel was determined to get things right. She persevered and put all her mind and attention to something once it piqued her interest.

As her husband, he would help her grow. He would ensure she didn't make costly mistakes, no matter what his uncle thought.

He would give his wife a conducive environment filled with love and laughter, so she wouldn't dream of packing her bags to leave him again.

His Rachel had come to stay. Of that, he was certain.

“**H**ow come you never learned how to cook?” the housekeeper asked.

Rachel's heart raced as she diced onions into a small bowl. She glanced at Adeline, not knowing how to change the topic without angering the older woman.

The last few days had been blissful; nobody had reminded her of her incompetence. She'd felt happier than she had been in a while and had blossomed under her husband's tender, loving tutorship.

Daniel spent an hour each day teaching her how to ride while they talked about random things. With his help, she could pick eggs without breaking them despite numerous distractions.

In fact, she had become so good at taking care of the birds that everyone left the chicken coop in her care.

She and her husband had also cleaned the ranch and fed and herded the animals. Feeding the cows had been especially difficult for Rachel because she was afraid of them, but once she overcame her trepidation, it became easier.

But her favorite chore was following Daniel on errands outside Hickman Ranch.

It didn't matter if he was purchasing supplies, selling goods, or just looking for a good bargain. She went with him to see new changes in

Fort Worth, talk to the townsfolk, and enjoy a different environment.

As Daniel kept guiding her to be more involved in the farming business, the lessons made her confident and the time spent together improved their relationship. Gradually, life at the ranch became less overwhelming.

Though her body hurt from the hard work she put in each day, the warm glow of pride she felt as she successfully performed her tasks made the pain worth it.

Sometimes, she noticed Travis observing her silently with a puzzled look. She knew she hadn't won his acceptance yet.

He hardly ever spoke to her except when he couldn't avoid it, and he spared her the affectionate gaze he reserved for Daniel when the younger man wasn't looking.

Still, she was happy with her progress.

Every morning, she woke up before the first rays of sunlight permeated the windows. And every morning, her husband got up before her.

The only time she'd been able to wake up and still meet him sleeping was when the cow had headbutted him. Now, no matter how hard she tried to wake up early, he was always up before her.

If they'd planned for some ranch lessons, she would go and meet him in the field. But if Daniel had something else to do, she would either tend the chickens, sew, or cook with Adeline.

Each time she went to the kitchen, the housekeeper patiently explained every step and taught her how to prepare different meals.

Rachel had woken up today as usual. She'd stifled a yawn as she got to her feet, dressed, and darted out of the cottage to help make breakfast.

The older woman had already started setting out the ingredients when she arrived. She greeted Rachel warmly, and they set out to prepare a healthy breakfast for six hungry mouths.

Rachel had expected that morning to be like all the others spent in the kitchen—quiet with a hum or two there and light singing. If at all Adeline had decided to start one of her sporadic cooking lessons, it would have been one of three things.

It could have been a fundamental cooking lesson, like when the housekeeper told her that adding seasoning to onion while frying enhanced the flavor of the food.

On the other hand, the older woman might make her cook the same meals she'd burnt. Rachel had cooked several types of beans and stew recipes that she could boast of since then.

She could have even told Rachel to prepare a meal while she supervised. In that case, she would have dished out instructions like:

"That's enough salt. Only put a little water to steam it. Now, here is the process of preparing a pie."

None of these would have bothered Rachel. But for Adeline to start poking into her past? That was a different ball game.

She kept dicing, the onions making tears pool in her eyes as the new flower-patterned curtains she'd made for the kitchen flapped back and forth. She'd also made matching curtains for the cottage and proudly set them up with her husband's help.

When she was done cutting up the onions and stared at the curtains long enough to make changing the topic of the conversation less awkward, she kept the bowl on the counter.

"Do you want me to sew a gown for you, Adeline? A simple dress with pleats will suit you."

The housekeeper frowned and stirred the porridge with a spoon. "Why do you avoid answering personal questions?"

Rachel sighed. The older woman had treated her with maternal care since she'd come to the ranch.

Her asking about Rachel's inability to cook until recently could only be out of kindness.

"I never got the chance to learn. We had a maid when I was younger," she said. "Then my pa fell into debt and my mother and I moved to a boarding house.

"It was a very difficult time for us. Overnight, we went from living comfortably to having nothing. My father wasn't there when we were forced out of our house."

Adeline placed a hand on her chest. "Oh dear."

Her expression was filled with sympathy, not pity. Rachel was glad. She didn't want anyone pitying her; that was one reason she'd kept her suffering from others.

"Then my ma died, and my craving for a family of my own intensified. I'd always dreamed of living by the countryside, watching my children play in the fields."

Her voice grew wistful. "I do hope that happens soon."

If Uncle Travis doesn't send me packing first.

Her stomach twisted. She pushed the unpleasant thought away.

Travis couldn't send her away. But if he ever got a chance to prove that she wasn't useful to the ranch, what would happen then?

Adeline smiled fondly. "I'm sure your dreams will come to pass." Then, she was silent for a few beats. "I used to dream of having a

family, too. I wanted a husband.”

Rachel looked at her with renewed interest. The housekeeper's smile held a hint of sadness.

"I never got married."

A sheep bleated loudly in the distance and Rachel's attention shifted to the window. Even though she wasn't so accustomed to the sound of livestock, she heard the agony in the sound.

Daniel had mentioned a pregnant sheep getting her foot stuck in a trap. The wound was either being treated, or the poor animal was in labor.

The smell of boiled potatoes snapped her attention back to the kitchen. Adeline stood with her back to her, peering into one of the pots.

Rachel knew one thing—she was standing behind a good woman, and some men would love to spend their lives with her in matrimony.

"You can still get married if you want," she said.

The housekeeper placed the lid back on the pot with a clang. She shot Rachel a look of utter disbelief.

“A husband? At my age?" She barked a laugh. "I'm not young anymore.”

Rachel studied her. Her red hair was piled in a neat bun atop her head, lined with a few streaks of white. Her dress was neat but not fancy.

She had no wrinkles, though she carried herself like a woman wise beyond her years. Rachel had pegged her to be around middle age.

She recalled the mail-order advert she'd seen before seeing Daniel's. A

man had asked for an elderly bride. Adeline was far from elderly, so how could she not find a husband?

"I'm sure some men are looking to marry women of your age," she repeated emphatically. "You can get married if you know the right place to search."

The older woman shook her head. "No. I don't want to have false hopes. I've tried to get married several times when I was younger and failed.

"My parents fell sick when I was eighteen and I had to take care of them. They both passed on several years later; my mother died a month after my twenty-fifth birthday and my pa joined her four years later."

She brought down the porridge from the fire. "By then, nobody in our little village wanted to get married to me because I was an old maid, and it's been like that ever since.

"All my attempts have been rebuffed. I've been laughed at or told to come and have a good time with the man and forget marriage.

"Now, I'm even older. Who would want to get married to me at forty-two?"

Rachel knew how she was feeling; she felt she had a kindred spirit with the woman. She'd been rejected by her friends and father's family, while the housekeeper had been rejected by the men she was willing to love. Such things could erode a woman's confidence.

She placed her hand on Adeline's. "If you really want to get married, I think you should. My ma used to say, life is too short to not pursue your dreams.

"I suggest you respond to a mail-order advertisement. You'll fit the requirements of a few."

“But what if they don’t want me, or they only want to play?”

“If I’d thought that way, I wouldn’t be Mrs. Hickman today with a lovely husband.”

The older woman looked thoughtful, doubt written all over her face.

Rachel sighed. "I know it will be more difficult for you than it ever was for me. Maybe you’ll correspond with your husband on the tenth try, or even on the twentieth.

“But if you never respond to an advert, you’ll lose all the chances you could ever have."

Adeline shuffled to the counter and resumed cooking. “I will do as you suggest. Thank you.”

Rachel hugged her. “I’ll make sure you do.”

The sound of sizzling sausage made Rachel hurry to the pan on fire. A spicy aroma permeated the air, making her mouth water.

She hummed to herself as she turned the sausage on the fire. Then, she put butter in another pan and placed it on the cast iron stove; Adeline had told her it added extra flavor to the eggs.

The onions sizzled when she added them to the melted fat. She let it fry for a while before pouring in the whisked eggs.

Deep voices and hearty chatter announced the men's arrival.

While Adeline attended to the potatoes, Rachel started brewing coffee. Clutching a handful of roasted Arbuckle beans, she added them to a pot of boiling water.

She'd never liked coffee, it was too strong for her. But the cowboys enjoyed it. Taking a cup of the dark and strong drink was part of their daily ritual.

By the time Rachel was done making the coffee, Adeline had arranged several apples, apricots, and berries into a bowl. She surveyed the scrambled eggs with a critical eye.

"Good. Good. You're ready to cook on your own."

Rachel stared at her in horror. "Oh, I couldn't. I don't think I'm ready."

"Yes, you are. You've made coffee, beans, stew, porridge, pies, amongst other things. I'm sure you'll cook a delicious meal.

"We'll get some supplies in the store after breakfast," she said, serving the food into large bowls.

"All right."

"Oh, and I would love that simple gown with pleats. Thank you for your generous gift," she added, smiling.

Rachel shook her head, chuckling. She'd given herself that task, after all.



Rachel hopped down from the carriage. The streets were busier than usual; several carriages weaved past the townsfolk, some of them loaded with goods.

A large bald man yelled profanities at someone he was speaking to, and an argument broke out.

"Merchants," Adeline said simply before approaching the doors of the general store.

Rachel followed her briskly. After they'd bought enough supplies to last a few weeks, they left.

"I need to get some letters from the post office," she said. "I'll meet

you at the ranch.”

The older woman shook her head, holding the reins tightly. "I'll drive you there, but you have to be fast. We're already late."

The horses moved slowly as they weaved through the throng of people on the streets to the post office. The line wasn't long, so she didn't have to wait.

Her aunt should have sent a reply. Rachel had sent several letters to her already.

She didn't know what to think. Did her mother's sister not want to have anything to do with her? Somehow, she couldn't believe the woman could act in such a manner.

Although Rachel hadn't seen her in years, she recalled that her aunt was sweet and kind. Surely, she would be troubled if she knew of her sister's passing.

The thought of her mother didn't bring the usual twinge of pain. Although she still missed her Ma, Rachel could look back at some memories with happiness.

If she'd stayed back in New York, the pain of returning to the boarding house room would have made her grieve even longer. But now, far away in the West, she was finding her footing and carving a place for herself. Thoughts of her mother didn't flood her with sorrow.

There was no letter from her aunt, just one from her father. Her disappointment gave way to excitement at the thought of reading her pa's message.

She left the post office to rejoin Adeline in the wagon and they drove back to the ranch.

Eager to know the content of the letter, Rachel almost ran into her cottage for some privacy. She tore the envelope open and sat down to

read.

Her father told her the pain in his legs was increasing. He wasn't sure how he would survive when summer arrived.

He then explained different useful ways to work on a ranch and expressed concern over the growing theft in the area. He asked her to describe Hickman Ranch so that he could suggest ways by which they would secure it and keep it safe.

After that, he asked for an image of her, saying:

...I want to see how much you've grown. I wish I could see for myself, but for now, a picture would have to do.

Rachel looked different from when she'd been in New York. The last time she'd examined her reflection, she'd noticed that her cheeks were rosier, her body had filled out, and her skin had tanned.

But she would have to send an old picture to her pa; she didn't know where she could get one done in Fort Worth.

Her time in New York seemed like years ago though she'd only spent a few months in Texas. Nevertheless, she'd been an adult then and a picture of her at that time would do.

Quickly, she penned a reply. Afterward, she placed both letters and the photograph between the pages of a book.

She could think about her father later. Right now, she had a meal to prepare.

Rachel sucked in a breath. If she was going to prove that she could adjust to life on the ranch, she had to show that she'd mastered the domestic art of cooking.

Quelling her jittering nerves, she left the cottage.

There was some leftover potato and porridge, so she warmed them before starting with the main meal. She'd decided to make apple pie.

She mixed flour, sugar, and salt, then added butter and kneaded the dough. After pouring in some eggs, she stirred. Satisfied with the mixture, Rachel went on to make the filling with slices of apple, lemon juice, sugar, cornstarch, salt, nutmeg, and cinnamon.

After that, she lined the baking pan with butter so that the pie wouldn't stick to it and placed the dough on it. She poured in the filling and put more dough on top, then pressed both doughs together before putting the pie on fire to bake.

Travis liked eating meat and vegetables, so she seasoned some beef, boiled it, and fried it. Then she used the broth to make soup, adding carrots and greens to give it more flavor.

She still chopped some carrots and cabbage in case he requested fresh, uncooked vegetables, and she boiled rice for Daniel and the ranch hands to have something to fill their bellies.

Rachel put out the fire and washed the cooking utensils several minutes before supper. It was the best meal she'd ever made as she had tried her best to do all she'd learned.

She felt it had a rich flavor and an aroma that made her want to eat everything up. But it wasn't personal praise she craved.

If Daniel and Travis would say they enjoyed the food, she'd be fully satisfied.

Daniel stepped into the farmhouse, anticipating another of Adeline's hearty meals.

He was dog-tired. They'd almost lost a sheep today because it had had a difficult labor, but Bernard had been of good help.

The aroma of fried beef permeated the air, making his stomach growl. Daniel felt ravenous after the hard day's work.

The ranch hands were already seated at the table. To his surprise, Adeline was sitting down, too. He raised a questioning brow.

"Rachel is feeding us tonight," she said, smiling.

Bernard and George grimaced, but once Daniel's eyes caught theirs, their expressions became neutral.

"Well, I hope we don't go to bed hungry," Travis quipped, taking a seat at the table. He appeared immensely pleased, as though assured such a disaster would happen.

Rachel burst into the room bearing platters of food. Placing them on the table, she caught his eye.

She looked nervous—her face was strained and her forehead gleamed with sweat, a few tendrils of hair matting to it. She darted glances at Travis occasionally.

Daniel gave her a comforting smile. Though she'd told him the housekeeper had been teaching her how to cook, he hadn't known she was handling supper all by herself.

If he'd had an inkling, he would have stayed in the kitchen with her. His presence would have been reassuring.

He looked at the trays and bowls. His wife had made pie and soup; he hoped she hadn't overrated her cooking skills.

Adeline offered to help serve the meal, but Rachel politely turned her down.

"I'll handle it," she said emphatically.

Daniel felt a trickle of pride. Gradually, her confidence in handling tasks was growing. She seemed different from the nervous and clumsy woman she'd been a few weeks ago.

The food looked good; it smelled good, too. There was silence at the table as she served everyone.

He tentatively spooned the soup into his mouth. It was delicious. He cut the pie and tasted it, closing his eyes and making satisfied sounds as the flavor burst in his mouth.

He opened his eyes and looked around the table, noticing that everyone had been waiting for him to try out the food first.

Rachel, who was sitting beside him, hadn't eaten a bite. She was darting nervous glances at the others, waiting for their judgment.

Except for Adeline, there were varying degrees of surprise on each person's face as they ate. Travis's eyes widened and he ate the beef faster.

A few seconds later, it seemed as if he recollected that he despised Rachel and schooled his face to an expression of indifference. After

their first taste, the ranch hands ate voraciously.

"This is good," Bernard commented.

"Delicious," George agreed.

"You've done well," Adeline said to Rachel in a low tone.

Then, she raised her voice. "Rachel has been cooking food for a while. She has cooked some meals that made you boys smack your tongues in satisfaction."

Rachel beamed.

This turn of events was a pleasant surprise. Daniel had expected his wife to be a good cook by the next year, but she'd learned so fast.

He hadn't even taught her some of his ma's recipes. Still, he could proudly declare that she would get them right. He looked forward to when they'd cook with their children.

The thought of having children with Rachel made him look at her with longing. Her eyes held his. He smiled and nodded, and her grin widened.

All eyes drifted to Travis, but his expression was blank. He didn't look up, nor did he say a word.

Daniel noticed the disappointment in his wife's eyes. He wasn't happy that his uncle didn't praise her.

He could have said, "It's nice," even with a displeased look, and that would have still encouraged her. But he was stubbornly sticking to his outdated opinions.

Rachel had improved tremendously. She was no longer a horrible cook, and it was something to be thankful for. She'd learned at such a fast pace that she was becoming as experienced as a rancher who had

spent a year working in the fields.

The other day, they'd seen a dead fish by the stream and she had suggested using it as manure. At first, Daniel had been skeptical. But when he asked around, he found out that she'd suggested a method used by the Indians.

She'd said she'd heard someone in the town say it, and he'd been elated at the news. She was attentive to the needs of the ranch at moments when she didn't need to be. Now, they didn't need to throw out any dead fish.

The change in his wife had made him rethink his view of city girls. Before she arrived, he'd had the same belief as Travis that women who hadn't grown up on a farm couldn't be trusted with ranch work. They would undoubtedly cause damage that would be detrimental.

But now, he was certain that all such women needed was the willingness to learn and a caring, patient teacher. They could become better under that kind of tutelage.

He hoped that his uncle would one day change his mindset, just like he had.

After eating for a while and seeing that Travis wouldn't acknowledge that Rachel's food was good, he decided to do it himself. He didn't want his wife's feelings to get hurt.

"Your meal is so delicious, Rachel. I look forward to eating any other food you'll make, and I'm sure everybody here will agree with me," he said, pointedly looking at Travis.

The older man ignored him.

"Adeline taught me, or I wouldn't have cooked a delicious meal," she said, grinning.

She turned to the housekeeper and embraced her, eyes sparkling.

"Thank you for teaching me and for pushing me to do this. I couldn't have done it without you."

Then, they began to talk.

Watching her chat animatedly with Adeline, Daniel marveled at Rachel's mental fortitude. She'd taken up tasks relentlessly, woken up earlier than before, and always got her chores done in time.

Her cleaning and riding had improved significantly, too. She'd adjusted to life on the ranch excellently.

Every day, he looked forward to spending the evenings with his wife. They sometimes rode at a leisurely pace to the fields.

He enjoyed listening to the lilt of her voice as she spoke and seeing the wonder in her gaze as she saw things she wasn't familiar with.

"...in Rochester, we had different meals. I enjoyed..."

Daniel frowned slightly. Rachel was happily telling Adeline about Rochester, her supper forgotten. He couldn't hear most of what she was saying, but her words bothered him.

If she was so happy here, why was she still talking about her life in the East?

Travis had finished his food. He placed the cutlery on the plate. He said something, but Daniel wasn't listening.

His attention was on Rachel's conversation. When he was sure that his wife was only reminiscing and not planning to leave Hickman Ranch, he relaxed.

His uncle was looking at him and shaking his head.

"Daniel," Travis said, calling his attention. "I've been talking to you, but you haven't been listening."

"We need a new ranch hand. The rustlers have stolen several animals from nearby ranches. I don't want that to happen to us, so we need to put some measures in place."

"I don't think we need a new ranch hand. Bernard and George are doing great at handling the job around here."

"Also, we have a barbed-wire fence around the ranch. The animals are safe."

Though he spoke to Travis, Daniel's mind was on Rachel. She laughed at something Adeline said, and he smiled. He loved hearing her laugh.

He turned slightly so he could look at his wife and his uncle at the same time.

"We can't be too cautious. With an extra hand, we can put proper security measures in place. Two people will watch over the animals one night while the other two will take over the next night," the older man said.

Daniel didn't think such stringent precautions were necessary. Travis had always been a cautious man and took security measures to the extreme, even when the ranch was in no danger from theft.

Besides, this wasn't the kind of conversation to have over supper. At the moment, all he could think of was his wife.

He hadn't seen her throughout the day. This was the first time in a long while they had gone from morning till evening without working together, riding, or going on a leisurely stroll.

It made his desire for her intensify. She laughed and leaned on Adeline, and the gesture made him wish that it was him she was touching so freely.

A burning sensation rose within him, pooling in his belly. How long would he put himself through this torture—wanting his wife and

restricting himself from doing anything about it?

He could put a stop to that tonight. Maybe he would tease her after supper or ask for another massage. She longed for his touch, too; he was sure of that.

If only they were in the cottage alone presently, he would...

"Daniel." His uncle's strained voice disrupted his thoughts.

Daniel realized his eyes were fixated on Rachel. He turned his head toward Travis.

"You didn't answer me, again," the older man said, looking between Daniel and his wife.

He looked around, trying to remember the last part of the conversation. It had to do with security, but what, exactly?

There was no other person who could remind him. Rachel and Adeline were talking merrily while Bernard and George were in deep conversation.

After a long pause, he looked at his uncle apologetically. "What were we talking about?"

The older man sighed. "We were talking about employing a new ranch hand, getting new security measures in place, and staying on night shifts."

He remembered all he'd heard from Travis so far and stated his opinion.

"I don't think it's necessary. Gangs have bothered surrounding ranches before, and we've never had to hire another hand. We shouldn't have to now."

His gaze drifted to Rachel.

The older man frowned. "Are you even listening? Ever since this woman came to this ranch, you've completely lost focus on important things."

Daniel tried to tune out Rachel so he could concentrate on what Travis was saying. "I haven't lost focus, Uncle."

"I've seen you shirking your duties and helping her with hers." Travis downed the last of his juice and stood.

He paused at the doorway. "If anything happens to those animals, it's your fault."

Daniel sighed heavily. He'd been distracted, alright, but he felt Travis had overreacted. He and his uncle's relationship had always been sturdy.

The man's determination to not accept Rachel had only succeeded in driving a wedge between them. Since his wife's arrival, they couldn't seem to agree on things, unlike in the past.

He glanced at her. Although he still wanted to hold her more than ever, he looked away.

He was bothered by his uncle's reaction. Rachel was trying her best. He just hoped Travis would someday see it.

Rachel's recent sewing project was her last attempt at making

Travis like her. She'd decided to do something special for everyone on the ranch to appreciate them.

However, the older man's package was the biggest of them all. She'd sewn curtains, clothes, and made quilts for him. She hoped he would like each one.

And if he suspected that she was just trying to curry his favor, he wouldn't have any reason to be suspicious since the gesture was directed toward everyone.

Sewing a large number of clothes in such a short time had taken a lot of effort. Though she was tired from all the hard work on the ranch, she still managed to carve out time for her sewing project.

She sewed after her morning chores and just before supper. Sometimes, she went into her room and added a few stitches after talking to her husband at night.

She'd proudly completed all the clothes, then ironed, folded, and placed them into separate bags for each person.

Presently, she walked to the window of the cottage and looked out. The trees were in full leaf, grasshoppers were chirping, and butterflies were fluttering nearby.

The atmosphere reminded her of her ma's flower gardens.

The ranch hands were sitting far off, watching the cattle, goats, and sheep graze. Travis was walking into his house and Daniel was hitching a wagon to leave the ranch.

Adeline was coming out of the chicken coop with a sack. Rachel had asked the older woman to help her out so she could put some finishing touches to the clothes she was sewing.

Rachel took four bags and left the cottage. She gave Bernard and George the shirts she'd made for them and they thanked her profusely.

She went to meet Adeline, who was about to go into the cabin. When Rachel handed her the cream gown with rose patterns, her eyes lit up.

"Thank you," she said.

Rachel opened the bag and brought out two mail-order bride catalogs, ink, and paper. "You should start replying to some advertisements today. I know you can find a good husband."

The housekeeper flipped through the pages of one catalog. An advert caught her eyes. "Someone wants a forty-year-old maiden," she said, her eyes bright.

Rachel nodded, smiling. She was glad she'd bought the catalog the last time she went to town.

Once the older woman started corresponding with a few people, she would surely find a suitable man who would want to marry her.

Adeline had been like a mother to her, guiding her and taking care of her. Ever since Rachel told her about her past, she'd become protective.

They'd formed a friendship that Rachel would miss once the housekeeper left the ranch.

Still, Rachel would have it no other way. She wanted the best for

Adeline. And since getting married was the older woman's dream, Rachel would help her actualize it.

Adeline continued looking through the catalog intently. Her lips stretched into a wide grin, and she pointed to another advert. "I would like to reply to this."

Rachel read through it. "Yes, go ahead. You might end up liking each other."

With that, she placed all she'd bought and made for Adeline into the bag and gave it to her. The older woman almost skipped into the cabin.

Now that she'd completed that portion, Rachel walked up to the farmhouse and knocked on the door. Travis opened it, a look of surprise on his face when he noticed that she'd been the person knocking.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I made these for you," she said, stretching out the large bag.

Travis looked from left to right. "Where's Daniel? Has he come back from town, and did he ask you to do this?"

Rachel shook her head. "I decided to do it on my own."

"Come in," he said and opened the door.

As soon as she stepped into the living room, she knew she'd made a mistake.

The walls and furniture were either dark or in neutral colors. All the curtains and clothes she'd made for him were bright and colorful.

She'd noticed the vibrant curtains in the dining room and thought Travis wouldn't mind a colorful wardrobe. But now that she thought

of it, that curtain looked like something Daniel would have put up.

His uncle only wore brown, black, and gray clothes. The only time she'd seen him wearing colorful clothing was a white shirt and blue pants he'd worn to visit a friend whose wife had just given birth.

The pants had been dark blue and the clothes had looked new—as if he'd never worn them.

She sighed, hoping that he would at least accept her gifts for Daniel's sake.

He brought out a red shirt and a look of disapproval crossed his face. "Where did you get my measurement?" he asked.

"We sewed different sizes of shirts at the garment factory where I worked in New York. I can guess your size by looking at you."

Travis nodded and brought out a curtain. His expression was blank. He quickly put it back and stood up stiffly. "I'll look at them later."

Rachel knew that was all the thanks she was going to get. At least he hadn't rejected the clothes.

"I have to check the fences and make sure there's no breach. I need to ensure that no thievery occurs on this ranch."

Rachel nodded as they left the farmhouse.

She forced herself not to feel bad about Travis not looking through all the clothes. Maybe, one day, he would put the curtains up and wear the bright red shirt she'd made.

She waited eagerly for Daniel to come home. Once she saw him riding the wagon into the ranch, she smoothed the powder blue shirt.

She'd secretly worked on it for days, waiting for the perfect time to give it to her husband.

The sound of his cowboy boots pounding on the floor alerted her to his arrival at the cottage. He greeted her with a smile, placed his hat on the rack, and flopped onto a chair.

Rachel approached him gingerly and held the shirt out to him. Daniel's face lit up with a smile. Taking the shirt from her, he examined it.

"A gift," she said, fiddling with her hands. She hoped he liked it.

Daniel shot to his feet with renewed vigor. "I should try it on."

He started unbuttoning his shirt. Rachel stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to do with herself. She glanced at him, and her mouth went dry.

His torso was bare, his chiseled chest bathed with light streaking in from the window.

Oblivious to her discomfort, Daniel slipped into the new shirt. Her cheeks flaming, she looked away until he'd covered himself with the shirt.

"It's quite fancy, eh? Fits like a glove."

The shirt did wonders for his physique. The powder blue color complemented his tan complexion and brought out the beauty of his dark eyes.

Rachel smiled and brought out matching pants and a lovely jacket. She showed him the other clothes she'd sewn for him and his eyes twinkled.

He was about to go into his room to wear them when he stopped and looked at her.

"Did you make anything for yourself?"

She nodded.

"Then wear the best of them all."

She chose a gown she'd made for herself. The material was soft and expensive, and she'd sewn an elaborate design.

While she was sewing it, she didn't know where she'd wear it to, but she'd decided to give herself a treat.

When she came out of the room, Daniel was standing in the living room and grinning at her. Extending an arm, he said, "Where to, milady?"

Giggling, Rachel put her arm through his. He pretended to open an imaginary carriage.

Holding her hand, he started singing a ridiculous song. His voice went from a low pitch to an unnaturally high note. Rachel burst into laughter.

Her husband was undaunted. He twirled her around the room, looking for all the world like they were at a fancy ball.

George must have heard the laughter because he peeked into the house and came back some minutes later with Bernard and Adeline.

They started singing different songs and making melodies. Daniel and Rachel danced into the evening. When the songs stopped, they held each other in a passionate embrace.

It was calm, peaceful, exhilarating.

Rachel could feel her emotions whirling, her heart beating erratically. She placed a hand on his cheek and brushed his eyebrows with her fingers.

He was giving her an intense look, his arm curved around her waist.

She wanted to stay in his embrace forever, to kiss him and forget about the rest of the world.

But other people were there, watching.

She gave him a peck on his cheek and he closed his eyes, holding her tighter. Then she stepped out of the warm embrace because she had some tasks she'd not done.

After supper, Rachel decided to write another letter to her aunt with the hopes that she would respond. She needed to ask her some pertinent questions. She wrote:

Dear Aunt,

How have you been faring?

I do hope you got my last letter and that you reply soon.

These past days have been a happy time for me. Gradually, I am adjusting to my new life on the ranch.

It is beautiful here. The birds sing every morning.

I love watching the rolling hills beyond the forest and listening to the soothing sound of the stream on the western part of the ranch.

And my husband? Oh, he is such a perfect gentleman. He cares for me so.

I do believe that coming to Fort Worth is the best decision I have ever made. I hope things will continue this way.

I have been corresponding with my father, although we have not met yet. I reckon that will happen soon...

Rachel paused her writing, frowning. She'd exchanged a few letters with her pa, but she hadn't told her husband about him. Should she have told him from the start?

It wasn't too late to tell him. Now that she and Daniel had become closer, she knew he wouldn't suspect her of using him to travel to Texas so she could find her father.

But what if Uncle Travis found out?

Her scowl deepened. He would never let her father come visit. Worse, he'd insist her motive for coming to Texas wasn't to marry Daniel.

She was sure her husband trusted her and wouldn't believe his uncle. But this was Travis's ranch. If he didn't want her father to visit, there was nothing Daniel could do about it.

Rachel exhaled through pursed lips. No matter how hard she tried, nothing seemed to impress her husband's uncle.

Not even the delicious supper she'd prepared for everyone, and he hadn't even looked at all the clothes and curtains she'd sewn.

She didn't understand why he was determined to never accept her. Was he so displeased with her merely because she was a city girl, or was there an underlying reason?

Rachel couldn't comprehend it. She'd envisioned journeying to the West would finally give her the beautiful family she'd craved.

Instead, she'd wound up with an in-law who was determined not to accept her and a husband who had to fight his family to defend her.

She sighed. If only Travis would warm up to her. She wished she knew how to make him realize she was good for Daniel, but so far, nothing seemed to work.

She dipped her feather into the ink bottle. Perhaps her aunt would know what to do. Rachel hoped she was still hale and hearty and would respond once she got the letter.

Daniel's dreams were being actualized right before his eyes.

When he'd built the cottage for himself and Rachel, he'd dreamed of a happy wife and the sound of pattering feet and joyous laughter.

He'd eagerly looked forward to the day she would transform the cottage into a home. Now, here he was, holding hands with her as they admired the perfect land for a flower garden.

She'd not only made the inside of the cottage more beautiful and lively with vibrant colors, but she also wanted to beautify the outside with exquisite plants that emitted subtly sweet floral scents.

The soil was cluttered with weeds, but it was fertile. So, it was the best choice for his wife's flowers. Besides, it was just beside the vegetable patch.

Although the rowdy mess was a sharp contrast to the neat rows of plants in the garden, he hoped that once the flowers grew, she would also care for the vegetables.

He spread an arm out to the patch of land, his tools beside him. "Here it is. This is a perfect place for our floral garden.

"Things grow quickly on this part of the ranch, and it's close to our home. Maybe one day, you'll teach our little children how to plant."

Rachel beamed.

Daniel had listened attentively when she'd recounted tales of her mother's garden. She'd been a little girl and had watched her Ma tend to the flowers and vegetables.

She'd told him how much she'd enjoyed those precious moments. He wanted her to recreate those memories—first, with him, then with their unborn children.

Her eyes shone with joy. "I can't wait to wake up every morning and watch the flowers bloom. There will be so many colors; it will be like having a rainbow in our backyard."

Daniel chuckled at her enthusiasm. She'd been talking about the garden for days.

Now, her face was flushed with excitement, and she seemed determined to finish weeding and start planting in an hour.

"You can plant hibiscus, rock rose, bee balm, black-eyed Susan, and fire bush. I'll ask Benedict at the general store what other flowers you can grow."

She got to her knees and started pulling out the weeds.

"Rachel, that's not—"

She screamed, withdrawing her hand sharply. She held her right hand up, her face contorted in pain. He rushed to her side and examined her hand. Her forefinger was bleeding.

"A thorn pricked me."

Daniel almost kicked himself. He should have told her not to weed with her bare hands, but he'd been so carried away by her excitement that he hadn't.

He hurried into the house to grab a clean rag. He wrapped it around her finger, letting her lean her back on his torso as he did so.

She stared at him with shining eyes. "Thank you, Daniel."

Daniel. He liked the sound of his name on her lips; it was almost musical. On impulse, his gaze drifted to her lips and back up to her face.

"Some weeds have thorns. Don't use your hands," he said, stepping away from her. His voice sounded gruff to his own ears.

He gave her protective gloves to put on. Then he gave her a hoe and grabbed another.

"This requires more physical effort than you're used to." He struck the hoe on the soil, breaking the surface into clumps. The force uprooted the grasses in one fell swoop.

"You have to remove them from the roots. This is the best way to ensure they don't grow back fast."

Rachel nodded and insisted on joining him immediately. Her attempts failed, and she laughed at herself. He joined in the laughter.

"Spring has always been my favorite season," he said. "I remember helping my ma in the garden while I was younger and running through the fields with my elder sister. It's a beautiful time."

Rachel was quiet for a few seconds.

"Spring brings hope," she said softly. They shared a smile.

Her expression shifted from tender to sad. "I can't forget the hopelessness I felt during the winter when my ma passed away."

Her voice was low. He could read the sadness in her eyes, and he understood her pain all too well because he'd lost his family when he was younger.

Losing the only family she had must have been traumatic. He'd been

lucky to have his uncle, but she'd had no one.

The image of the burning ranch flashed in his mind. He understood Travis's distrust. After all, he'd lost his family due to the carelessness of a clueless city girl.

His uncle feared a repeat of that incident.

Daniel had decided not to leave Rachel's learning to chance and ensured he taught her what she needed to know.

He was even planning to show her how to set traps and defend herself if need be. She was learning fast.

His uncle had nothing to be afraid of. Rachel wouldn't make a mess of things, not as Caroline had.

He wouldn't just teach her how to carry out her duties on the farm, he'd teach her how to stay safe.

"After her death, I felt like I had no one. No family. Then you and I began a correspondence, and I was filled with hope again."

She didn't look at him as she spoke. "You gave me hope that my dreams could come true."

He held her arms. "And we'll continue to grow that hope for you and me and our children."

The warm, earthy scent of the soil combined with the fresh green smell of the weeds. Rachel's cheek was streaked with dirt, and as he leaned toward her to remove it, he felt the soft smoothness of her cheeks brush against his finger.

Her warm breath fanned his face. She raised her head up slowly before finally fixing her gaze on him. Daniel found himself drowning in her eyes.

Long sweeping lashes framed her eyes, her cheekbones were high, her nose small and regal. His eyes trailed past her cupid's bow to the demure lines of her lips.

Daniel inched toward her. Her hands stopped moving.

This fiasco of always wanting to know what it would feel like to be with his wife, to touch her, and feel her warmth, had to stop. He couldn't continue wondering what she tasted like; he had to know.

She turned and was moving toward him. Her arms encircled his waist; he held her back.

Time stood still as he pecked her forehead, her nose, her cheeks. Tilting her chin up, he finally claimed her lips with his.



The light from the lamp cast a golden glow around the room, contrasting with the darkness outside. A coyote howled somewhere in the distance as Daniel woke up before the crack of dawn, the feel of his wife in his arms.

He'd slept in her room the previous night.

Rachel was still sound asleep, her expression so peaceful. He smiled at her and brushed her long hair with his fingers.

His beautiful wife. He could hardly wait for them to start a family.

Daniel slowly got up from the bed. Stifling a yawn, he stretched. He would have loved to stay in bed longer, but there was work to do.

Travis had already implied that Rachel was distracting him, so Daniel didn't want to give the man another reason to think he was slacking.

His eyes drifted to the only desk drawer in the room. A paper peeked out from the drawer. Curious, he reached for it and saw that it was a

letter to Rachel.

His gaze skipped to the end of the note. It was from a man named Steven.

Daniel frowned. Who was Steven? Rachel had never mentioned anyone called Steven.

She'd told him she'd been corresponding with her best friend and trying to reach her aunt, but she hadn't said anything else.

He decided to quell his curiosity. Perhaps she'd forgotten to tell him. Rachel wouldn't intentionally hide something from him, would she?

She was his wife. If he wanted to have a good marriage, he had to trust her.

He glanced at her sleeping form, then back at the letter. He was sorely tempted to ask her about Steven. Suppressing the urge, he folded the letter.

Whoever Steven was, Rachel would tell him soon enough.

And if she doesn't?

Ignoring the thought, Daniel placed the letter into the drawer. He would see for himself if she was indeed worthy of his trust. He couldn't bear to think of the alternative.

Rachel woke up that morning feeling more satisfied than ever.

It was daybreak, and sunlight was streaking in from the window.

She quickly stood up, washed, and dressed. Then she went to the kitchen to help her friend Adeline.

Making a new friend wasn't as hard as she'd thought. She'd expected to have a family of her own in Fort Worth.

She hadn't counted on having a friend, too, but that was what she'd gotten.

The sting of Travis's blatant rejection was soothed by the housekeeper's warm acceptance, and their relationship had grown deeper with time.

She hoped the older woman had replied to several mail-order-bride advertisements by now.

As she got into the kitchen, they began to make breakfast. Adeline had left a pot of beans to slowly cook throughout the night.

Rachel inhaled the scent, her mouth watering. She helped prepare the chicken, eggs, and pancakes. They would be eating the pancakes with some expensive honey Travis had bought.

They also made some stew and coffee. Afterward, they ate breakfast and each person went about their tasks.

Rachel walked into the kitchen, poured some water in a pan, and began to wash the dishes.

"I can handle the dishes, Rachel. You have too much to do to bother with this," Adeline said.

Rachel waved Adeline's objection off. She loved helping the woman prepare breakfast—sometimes she insisted on cooking entire meals from scratch—and helping her with the dishes afterward.

Of course, the housekeeper always complained that she was adding too much work to her plate, but Rachel didn't mind. She enjoyed talking to the older woman, and they always had a lot to discuss.

"You say that every time. I'm not complaining now, am I?" she said, taking a plate from Adeline and putting it in the washing pan.

Adeline smiled at her. "You've been doing great with the chores. Especially cooking. I'm afraid everyone will start preferring your meals to mine."

Rachel grinned, warmed by the compliment. Initially, she'd been afraid of cooking, but once she understood the basic concept and started preparing several meals, her fear had dissipated and she became more adept at the task.

Now, she didn't see cooking as work; she enjoyed it. And the delight on people's faces as they ate each meal she prepared made all the hard work worth it.

She especially loved Daniel's compliments. He'd told her he was proud of how well she'd improved.

When she tried out a new recipe or gave her food a unique taste, he was quick to lavish her with praise. He'd even taught her how to prepare a few dishes he'd learned from his ma.

Rachel cherished those recipes and kept trying to make a variety of his

mother's meals. The action always made her husband give her special treatment.

Despite her cooking prowess, Travis still had never complimented her meals. But she knew he liked them.

He no longer pretended to pick at the food with distaste or tentatively taste it before diving in. He ate her meals with gusto and ensured that he had a piece of every meal she cooked, especially new dishes he'd never tasted before.

He reserved some of her juice to drink at night and had once requested more grape juice.

Moreover, she could feel his animosity toward her lessen with each passing day. It was subtle, but it was enough to give her hope.

Perhaps if she continued doing things right and becoming better at carrying out her chores, he would warm up to her.

"You're a fast learner. I hear you're making work easier for our ranch hands," the housekeeper said, bringing Rachel out of her thoughts.

Rachel giggled. "I have good teachers. You told me not to give up, so I didn't."

And that was true. Adeline had been instrumental to her happiness.

When she'd just arrived and it seemed like everyone was against her, the housekeeper had solidly stood behind her with encouraging words and kind gestures. Maybe she would have gone back to Rochester if she hadn't had an older female to guide her.

Daniel and her pa had also been helpful. She'd never envisioned having such a relationship with her father while she was in Rochester.

She'd thought she would be bitter toward him, but his condition and how helpful he'd been made her heart glow with warmth whenever

she thought of him.

She wrote to him often and always got prompt replies. Whenever she needed help on ranching matters, she asked him.

His knowledge about ranch life was profound; he must have learned a lot after moving to the West.

She rinsed off the soap lather from the plates and started wiping them with a clean towel. Then, she stacked them on the counter.

Adeline was drying out some fruits so they could store them for a longer period. Once Rachel had put the plates in the cupboard, she joined the housekeeper to cut the fruits and berries into thin slices.

They removed the skins from the apples, mangoes, and peaches before soaking them in lemon juice for a few minutes.

As they waited, Adeline's eyes took on a faraway look and a rosy hue appeared on her cheeks.

"About what you said—the mail-order advertisements. I've been corresponding with a man from Minnesota."

Rachel felt joy coursing through her. Before she could stop herself, she squealed in excitement and hugged the older woman. "Oh my, that's wonderful!"

She hadn't washed her hands after cutting the fruit, so her sticky fingers prevented her from participating fully in the embrace. Nevertheless, she was happy for her dear friend.

Adeline's soft laughter tickled her ears. "It didn't take ten or twenty tries as you said, and I didn't even need to buy another catalog. He was the fourth person I replied to."

Rachel watched the housekeeper glow. She couldn't even control her actions as she talked about this Minnesota man. Occasionally, she

would flick her hair while referring to him.

“So, what is his name?”

“Albert. Isn’t it a fine name?”

Rachel nodded. “It’s a fine name. When are you getting married and how many children do you want to have?”

The older woman blinked and gave her a strange look. “It’s early days yet, but I’m hopeful things will pan out well.”

Rachel couldn’t agree more. Adeline deserved a good man who would love and cherish her forever. She was well-equipped with the skills required to build a home.

She was hard-working, diligent, warm, gentle, wise, kind, and a good listener. She could prepare wonderful meals and had a motherly way about her.

Many men would want to keep her once they got to know what she was made of.

“I’m sure you’ll have an easier time being a wife than I have,” she said, half-teasing. “You already know everything!”

Adeline’s chortled, her laughter ringing through the kitchen.

With that, they continued preparing the fruits. They took out the slices from the lemon juice and lined them on different pans. Then Rachel left Adeline to dry them up in the fire.

She had to pick eggs, clean the chicken coop, and tend to her garden.

She started with the birds. She would feed them and collect their eggs. Then, she would work on the garden before the scorching sun came out. Afterward, she’d go and clean the coop.

The hens began their usual protest when she started picking the eggs. Rachel continued humming to herself despite the noise.

She opened a new bag of feed as the previous one had run out. After she put the feed and water in their trough, she went to look for Daniel.

He was standing by the stream, talking to Bernard and George. She patiently waited for him to finish dishing out instructions before she walked to him and lightly bit his cheeks, letting her lips caress the supple skin.

Before she could run away, he caught her in his arms and lifted her with his strong, muscular arms. She only needed to look into his eyes to guess what he would have done if they'd been inside the cottage.

Still, she could feel the fluttering in her stomach. Her arms went around his neck, and she pecked him all over his face. Then she wriggled until he let her go.

With a triumphant grin, she said, "Will you help me with the garden?"

He crossed his arms over his chest, eyebrows raised. "Was that what this display was for? I should return the favor; then we'll be even."

He reached out a hand to grab her. She evaded him and ran to the cottage, panting hard when she got there.

With that light mood, they weeded the rest of the garden and started planting the seeds.

Rachel's new project filled her with joy. She couldn't wait for the plethora of colors that would light up the environment once her flowers started to bloom.

As she worked beside her husband, she couldn't help but notice how diligent he was in teaching her. He'd kept to his word.

She'd become a better rider, and Daisy was her favorite horse. It was all because of his tutelage.

Daniel had patiently shown her how to feed and maneuver the animals in an orderly fashion. It was no easy task, but she'd done it a few times.

The amazing part was how he kept at it until she overcame her fear and was confident in her ability. Now, she could herd the cattle out to feed them in the fields without anybody's help.

As they planted, Rachel noticed that they didn't have enough seedlings, so Daniel hitched up the wagon and they drove into town.

They bought the seed from another farm and went to the bakery so she could get a taste of Logan's strawberry cakes with their sweet taste and fruity scent.

She ate some and gave a few to her husband, asking him to eat it as slowly as possible, as if he wanted each piece to melt in his mouth. He laughed loudly, tried it once, then finished the cupcake in a few seconds by biting it into two halves.

Afterward, they went to the post office. She picked up a letter, which she thought was one of the numerous letters from her father or a rare piece from Charlotte—her friend now spent so much time with Eric that she didn't write as much as before.

But when Rachel looked at the handwriting and the name, her eyes widened.

It was from her aunt. What a pleasant surprise!

After sending several letters, she'd all but given up on getting a reply. Now that she had, she was tempted to read it right away.

But that wouldn't be wise. She wouldn't be able to concentrate fully on the letter if she read it on the way back to the ranch.

The shouts of greetings from the passersby and the sights of the new building that was being erected in town would distract her.

Plus, she had a lot of work to do and would keep thinking of cleaning that chicken coop. It would be better to calmly read her aunt's message once she was done with her chores and well-rested.

When they got back home, she rushed to the cottage and tossed the letter in her room. She resolved to put the missive in her box later on or read and keep it in the desk drawer.

She always kept letters she'd read in the drawer and unopened ones in her box. That way, she would be able to distinguish them and not miss any message.

It was already afternoon, and the weather was quite hot.

Hurrying to the coop, Rachel started humming. Adeline's news and her aunt's reply had lifted her mood. She worked happily, cleaning the birdhouse thoroughly.

When she left to dump the dirt she'd cleaned out, she felt someone staring at her. Turning, she noticed it was Travis. He averted his gaze, and Rachel burst with pride.

Last night, George had commented on how much her cleaning had improved. Bernard had said the same. Travis, as usual, had said nothing.

Now could he see she was well-suited to life on the ranch?

He has to acknowledge it sometime soon, she thought smugly.

Rachel's good mood lasted all day. When she was done with her tasks, she noticed the animals were still roaming lazily about.

She heard someone working on the roof and looked up. George nodded at her, and she gestured toward the animals.

"I can see that you're busy. I'll take care of them."

George removed the nails from his mouth. "I'll be done in a short while. Bernard has gone to town on an errand, or else he would have herded them in."

"I can handle it," Rachel insisted.

It might take a while for him to finish his chore, and it's getting late, she thought.

George finally conceded. "Thank you, missus."

She grinned at him, pleased to be helpful.

"There," she said when the last animal entered the barn. Dusting her hands dramatically, she started walking toward the cottage.

But then a line of colorful flowers on the ground made her pause. It was leading to the stream. Curious, she followed the flowers until she found a blanket spread on the ground under a tree.

Her husband sat there, grinning at her sheepishly.

Dusk had fallen. The orange-pink sunset colors had disappeared, and the sky had taken a dull gray color.

A strong breeze blew toward her, bringing with it the woody scent of the trees. Rachel inhaled deeply. She could almost taste the clean air.

Daniel opened the spread out on the blanket and a delicious beefy aroma welcomed her. Plates of cornbread and calf's foot jelly greeted her eyes with their sumptuous view.

Her stomach growled; all that hard work had made her hungry.

He grinned at her, and her heart danced. "Dinner is served."

Rachel kissed her husband. "Thank you, darling."

They sat down to eat. As Rachel enjoyed her meal, she was enraptured by Daniel—his posture was more confident, his shoulders seemed broader.

A lovely dinner with her husband after a busy day was just what she needed.

Her marriage was wonderful, and she was corresponding with her family. As she thought more about it, she realized that her life had become more beautiful, eliciting more happiness from her. There was a lot to be thankful for.

She'd noticed a pattern that she prayed would continue. Daniel was proud of her, and she was impressing everyone with her hard work and fast learning.

At the end of each day, she returned home to share wonderful moments with her husband. She was starting to have the life she'd always longed for.

Nothing could possibly go wrong.

Daniel's eyes popped open, and he immediately knew that something was wrong.

The room was flooded with sunlight, and the birds on the large tree beside the cottage were chirping loudly. Although he'd been feeling pains due to spending a better part of the previous day fixing leaky roofs and loose boards, the soft bed soothed his aching back.

He sat, stretched his arms, and yawned. It had been a long time since he'd slept till daybreak. Daniel was well-rested, but he couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something was amiss.

He ran a hand down his face, feeling the familiar sensation of his goatee. His gaze returned to the half-open windows.

As if on cue, the chirping of the birds increased, but he couldn't enjoy the sounds. Something was missing, and he couldn't figure it out.

His wife stirred beside him. Her slender arm lay on the multicolored blanket, her creamy skin a stark contrast to his more tanned color.

Watching her, he was reminded of how pale she'd been when she arrived in Fort Worth—like she'd never seen the sun. Now she was lightly tanned from working outdoors.

The color suited her.

A neighing horse jerked him out of his thoughts. In a flash, it became

clear: although there was noise all around him, the ranch was too quiet.

He couldn't hear the mooing of the cows or the bleating of the goats and sheep.

To make matters worse, he'd slept in. How had that happened? He never woke up late.

He listened carefully and the faint sound of shouting from afar reached his ears. The sound stirred a feeling of urgency within him. Daniel scrambled out of the bed.

His movement woke Rachel. "What's happening?" she asked.

"That's what I'm about to find out."

He hurriedly put on his boots and snatched his hat from the table. Pulling on a shirt, he ran out of the house.

He heard footsteps behind him and didn't need to look to know they were his wife's.

As he ran through the empty field that not even a single animal grazed on, his heart began to pound in his chest. What had happened to the animals?

The barn seemed normal to him when he got there.

The door was open, and he could see the animals in their stalls. The goats were getting restless as they'd already started butting the doors caging them in.

Travis, Bernard, and George were by the barn door while Adeline walked toward them with a bewildered look. The ranch hands were looking at the ground, their faces pinched.

Travis wore a murderous expression. On seeing Daniel, his face

darkened even further.

"What happened?" Daniel asked, his eyes darting from one man to the other.

Bernard started to reply. Travis gave him a warning look and he shut his mouth.

Daniel walked into the barn and started from the farthest stall to inspect the animals. Had they fallen ill overnight? Did they have some contagious disease?

But the cattle, sheep, and goat were looking healthy. The goats were just restless, and the cows would soon follow suit.

He didn't see anything wrong with the barn, either. The stalls were extra clean and hardly had any manure or dirt. The place smelled fresher than it had in a while.

Still, something terrible had happened, and his uncle had given him a test to personally find out what it was. He was halfway to the door and had passed a particular stall when he stopped and stepped back.

The place looked scanty. He looked at the sheep again.

One, two, three, four, he counted.

There were supposed to be five sheep in there. Why was he counting four?

He turned to look at the people standing by the door, wide-eyed. Travis was squinting at him, a scowl on his face.

He turned back and counted the animals again, realizing what must have happened. They'd not sold or eaten any sheep in the past few months, which led to only one conclusion.

It couldn't be, mustn't be. But Daniel's mind could only think of one

thing:

Rustlers.

He decided to ask anyway. Maybe it was wild animals or a disease caused by the ranch hands' negligence that had led to the sheep's death and removal from the stall.

"What happened to the animals? Why are there four sheep instead of five in this stall?" he asked.

"The animals are gone," Bernard said. "I wouldn't have noticed if Travis hadn't instructed me to count the livestock each morning and tell him how many there are."

He stared at them in shock. "Gone? What do you mean by 'gone?' How could that have happened?"

Bernard didn't reply.

He breathed in and out several times to stay calm. "How many animals are 'gone?'"

"Two sheep and a goat are missing."

He hated to ask the next question, but he did anyway. If there was any luck, the answer wouldn't be what he thought it was.

"How did they get missing?"

Bernard looked away. It was then that George spoke, his voice filled with shame.

"We don't know. We think they were stolen, but there's no sign of forced entry into the barn. It's almost as if the person appeared in front of the stall, took the animals, and disappeared."

Daniel bent his head and covered his face with his hands. The animals

must have been stolen if they were nowhere to be found.

The exact thing he'd thought would never happen had occurred.

How did it happen? How?

By the time he looked up, Rachel's hands were on her cheeks, a look of horror on her face. Adeline seemed surprised, and Travis's body was shaking in anger.

"This is all your fault, Daniel," he said through gritted teeth. "You caused this theft."

Daniel reeled back in shock. His fault? How was he to blame for the animals' disappearance?

No, they hadn't disappeared; they'd been stolen. And somehow, his uncle blamed him for that.

"How?" he asked. "I didn't invite thieves onto the ranch."

The older man sneered and shook his head. "If you'd been doing your job and ensuring the animals were secure, they wouldn't have been stolen.

"Let's start with today. It's long past daybreak and you're just waking up. How, exactly, have you been handling ranch tasks if you wake up at any time you like?"

The words hit Daniel like barbs, and he looked away. He shouldn't have woken up late; he knew that much.

After the picnic dinner by the stream, he and his wife had talked late into the night, reminiscing on their childhoods and swapping stories. Then, they'd gazed at the full moon and the stars.

They'd only gone to sleep when neither of them could keep their eyelids open any longer. As a result, they had woken up late.

“Why this event is more annoying is that you didn’t discard your ranch duties for an altruistic purpose. You simply ignored your means of livelihood to frolic with this city girl.”

Travis uttered the last three words like they were offensive.

Daniel felt bad he hadn't roused early. Still, he didn't see how being with his wife had resulted in the thievery.

He tried defending himself. "I didn't know the animals would get stolen.”

"How could you?" his uncle asked with a sarcastic tone. "Of course, you wouldn't know."

Behind him, the ranch hands stood awkwardly, feet shuffling uncomfortably. Adeline was looking from nephew to uncle, and Rachel covered her face with her hands as if she didn't want to witness the scene.

But Travis wasn't done. “Who is in charge of the day-to-day activities on the ranch?” he said and started pacing.

Although Daniel was in charge, he refused to answer. He already knew what the older man was doing. Travis was trying to build up a strong argument against him.

“Who is in charge of security?” his uncle asked, stopping in front of him.

The barn suddenly felt too small, and Daniel wanted to escape the scrutiny.

He frowned. “I am.”

“So, what do you think will happen when the person in charge of security neglects his duties? When did you check the animals last? When was the last time you counted them or even bothered to

examine the fence to make sure Hickman Ranch is still secure?"

He turned to the observers by the door.

"Do you now understand what I was talking about? If you stop securing a place, it's only a matter of time before thieves and rustlers come to take what doesn't belong to them."

Daniel felt hot anger rising fast within him. He didn't like being humiliated like this, but before he could react, Travis continued.

"I suggested hiring a new ranch hand for security purposes, but you told me that was unnecessary. You were informed about the rustlers' attacks, yet you didn't take extra measures to protect the place.

"I placed you in charge for a reason, Daniel. You paid attention to detail, and you never slacked. You've changed."

His uncle stared at him with something akin to disappointment and Daniel's anger melted away.

For a while, he didn't know what to say. Guilt pricked at him.

Travis was right; he had changed. He'd been preoccupied with Rachel when the older man talked about hiring a new ranch hand. He'd only heard some sentences.

"You've gotten distracted. I told you marrying her was a bad idea, but you didn't listen. Now, look what misfortune your blatant mule-headedness has brought upon us."

Daniel sucked in a breath and strove with all his might to control his annoyance. He bit his tongue, swallowing a retort.

He didn't like the fact that his uncle had somewhat pinned the blame on Rachel. Dragging her into the matter was uncalled for. She'd had nothing to do with this.

More than that, although he was sorry the animals had been stolen, he didn't understand how this was his fault. Travis's anger was justifiable but misdirected.

Still, it was true that his attention had become divided since he married his wife. He had to love her, teach her, and somehow still be on top of things at Hickman Ranch.

Eventually, he had to pay less attention to something, and he'd simply delegated his tasks. Maybe that was partly why he hadn't taken his uncle seriously during supper.

"I'm sorry for not agreeing to your suggestion—"

"You should be sorry for being negligent of your duties. You're in charge of security, yet you couldn't ensure the ranch was safe from rustlers."

Travis gestured to the open barn. "Will your apology fix this? Will it return the animals, or will it rectify the damage caused?"

He wagged a finger in Daniel's face. "You're to blame for this." He stomped away.

The silence was uncomfortable. Bernard, George, and Adeline left immediately.

Rachel was trying to put on a brave face. Daniel walked up to her and held her, placing her head on his chest.

They stayed that way for several minutes, embracing and comforting themselves.

Try as he might, Daniel couldn't fathom how the thievery was his fault. He might have been giving his wife all his attention, but he hadn't been slacking.

He'd simply been teaching her how to handle tasks on the ranch the

best way possible. And she'd learned fast, hadn't she?

During that period, he'd given Bernard and George the responsibility of securing the place.

Besides, he couldn't remember ever sleeping in, except after the headbutting incident. The one time he'd slept late, the animals had been stolen.

And somehow, Travis had castigated him for it.

Daniel twirled Rachel's sleek hair around his index finger. He loved his wife; she loved him. And they displayed their love openly and affectionately.

Such a situation could distract any man, yet he'd given the ranch all his time and effort, even when he'd seemingly been 'frolicking' with her.

There was no way his waking up late one time and getting distracted a few times could have resulted in this thievery. He'd done nothing wrong.

For the first time in a long while, he felt completely at a loss.

Travis stomped away from Daniel and the others. He strode through the ranch, his countenance darkening with each step.

He wasn't sure where to begin investigating the theft, but he had to figure out a way to find the stolen animals. First, he needed to clear his head, and he couldn't do that while he was near his careless nephew and the city girl.

They'd both stood there, looking for all the world like they were innocent and he was the villain.

He'd known this would happen. Daniel had changed from the moment he'd started corresponding with Rachel.

His nephew was no longer the focused, hard-working man Travis knew. Instead, he'd become doe-eyed and careless, wasting away precious time riding and strolling with that girl and shirking his duties.

He recalled when the boy had first brought the letter in which Rachel had agreed to marry him. He'd been dancing to an inaudible rhythm, of all things.

That was when he displayed the first signs of distraction.

Travis should have nipped it in the bud that moment, but he had tried to be gentle—to advise instead of command. And where had that gotten him?

Not only had his nephew gone ahead to wed, but he'd also decided to swim in the stream of distraction and negligence.

Daniel had started frolicking with the girl in the name of educating her. Each day, he spent hours teaching her what any capable hand could complete in mere minutes.

After that, they spent the rest of the day riding with their heads bent toward each other as they discussed whatever it was young lovers were wont to talk about.

It was annoying, infuriating. Daniel had preferred the long discussion to actually doing some work. He'd neglected the upkeep of the ranch.

He didn't ensure the sheep were sheared on time or the feed was bought long before it had finished. He didn't plant the vegetable gardens or deliver the ranch produce to stores to sell.

Instead, he waited till it was nearly too late before he handled his duties. If there had been an emergency or a storm, the chickens would have had no feed and the other animals would have gone hungry without hay.

What made his nephew's action more disheartening was that the state of Hickman Ranch was getting worse, and they were hardly making any profit.

The last time they'd recorded such poor profit by this time of the year was four years back. All this was because his love-stung nephew couldn't keep on top of things.

To cap it off, the boy had gone ahead to spend carelessly. He couldn't fathom what Daniel had been buying and why he hadn't been seeing the effect on the ranch.

Was his nephew just getting things at a high price because he bought them late?

The expenditure for this year was much higher than that of the two previous years.

He'd turned a blind eye to the money spent on building the cottage and thought Daniel just needed some privacy since he had become a man, but he hadn't expected such exorbitant expenses to continue into the year.

Daniel had also become lax with security, which had led to the stealing of several animals. He'd insisted that the rustlers wouldn't attempt to steal from the ranch.

But Travis's instincts had been right all along; the stolen animals were proof.

What made matters worse was that the ranch hands had somehow imbibed some of his nephew's negligence. How else could they explain that they didn't hear the thieves when they broke into the barn or carted the animals off?

Didn't the sheep and goat bleat? Why hadn't they heard the noise?

Travis kicked a decaying branch off his path. The sound of the burbling stream did nothing to calm his anger or the guilt that had begun to settle within him as he realized he should have stepped in a long time ago.

He'd only started to check the ranch records some few days back. That was when he noticed the financial and management problems they were having.

If he had gone through them earlier, he would have implemented new strategies faster.

Travis's eyes swept through the colorful flowers sprouting from the bushes, but he was too upset to appreciate the view. He took the last few feet to the stream and rested his back against a tree.

If only Daniel had listened to his request to get another ranch hand and watch the property at night, this wouldn't have happened. He'd let Rachel distract him from his duties, and since he'd been put in charge of the ranch, he was to blame for the theft.

Travis wondered how he would find the animals. He had branded them behind their ears, of course, but rustlers were known to distort the mark with a hot iron or add their own brand.

Since new owners usually placed their mark on top of the animals' previous brand, nobody thought much of animals that had two or more brands on their bodies.

Moreover, if they couldn't change the mark quick enough, the rustlers could just cut the animals' ears off and blame it on an accident.

One thing that bothered Travis deeply was that rustlers had never attacked their ranch before. Now that they had, they would bring in their own unique set of problems.

First, the original thieves that had stolen the goat and two sheep would try to come back again and again. They wouldn't be satisfied with just a few animals and would keep up with the thievery until they were caught or scared off.

Other rustlers would hear about the porousness of Hickman Ranch and attempt to get their own share of livestock. They would invent new ways to steal, too.

Travis rested the back of his head on the tree and closed his eyes. One decisive way to stop the rustlers was to arrest them and get his animals back, but he didn't know how to start the search or where to go.

He'd invested quite a sum to ensure maximum security; he was still baffled as to how the thieves had succeeded.

How *had* the rustlers gotten into the ranch, despite the fence? His

brow furrowed in deep thought. It didn't make sense. They couldn't have gotten in, yet they had.

There were no traces of where the animals had been taken. It was as if they'd flown out of the ranch. But that couldn't be.

The thieves must have left some tracks. Maybe they'd just covered it well enough.

He decided to examine the fence to get an idea of what had happened. He walked farther out, pausing to scrutinize the perimeter of the ranch.

The barbed wire and wooden fence looked untouched, yet the thieves must have entered somehow. The barbed wire still had sharp edges and pricked his fingers when he wasn't careful. The wood still had a rough texture.

However, he noticed that someone had poured long sticks, dirt, and debris into the traps around an area of the barbed wire fence to spring them. But the traps around the wooden section were still active.

He looked carefully at the ground close to the fence, within the ranch. Not everything seemed natural. Some leaves looked like they'd been placed there by someone, and there were fading footprints that had been hastily scratched out in the dirt.

Travis touched the fences again. They'd not used the wooden fence, or they would have been caught by the traps lying there and they couldn't have climbed the barbed wire or there would be signs of injury. So, where did they go through?

He resolved to walk around the fence outside the ranch to investigate further, but first, he had to load his guns and ensure that Daniel and the ranch hands could still shoot as well as he had taught them. He would eat breakfast, then begin that task.

A thought occurred to him as he walked back to his house. The

rustlers had never bothered them before. Why now?

It was only after Rachel arrived in Fort Worth that they started attacking the place. Did this have something to do with her arrival on the ranch?

No, that was ludicrous. She couldn't have come all the way from New York to marry Daniel just so she could create an opening for the ranch to be attacked. It didn't make sense.

Or did it? The more he thought about it, the more reasonable it seemed.

Rachel's arrival and the rustlers' attack couldn't have been a coincidence. She had something to do with it. She must have been part of the plan.

She'd first come to the ranch acting like she didn't know how to handle any task and was only interested in being a wife to Daniel without putting in the necessary work.

When she'd found out he wouldn't tolerate her laziness, she had started pretending to learn awkwardly.

Once she'd gotten his nephew's attention and they spent all their time together, she showed her true skills. She was suddenly adept at all the chores and handled things excellently.

Nobody learned that fast except if they had outside help. She'd even suggested using farming methods that were only known to the Indians.

That should have made everyone suspicious, but they weren't. Daniel was already too distracted by her antics and her fake display of love. He didn't ask any questions.

Who had she met that had told her about using a dead fish as manure? How did she know any Indians in the area? She must have known

them long before she met his nephew.

She could even be part of a gang or have something to gain from the theft.

She'd caused friction in Travis and Daniel's relationship and made them lose what was vital to the ranch's survival.

If Travis's suspicions were accurate, he, Daniel, and Hickman Ranch were in deep trouble.

Travis clenched his jaw. He would find out if Rachel was the cause of the theft, then send her away.

Daniel would realize that he'd been right all along—a city girl wasn't fit for a ranch, especially one as shady as Rachel.

Besides, Travis had to ensure that Hickman Ranch didn't become insolvent.

Rachel stayed in the warmth of her husband's embrace, all the while thinking, *it happened. The rustlers stole the animals just like I thought they would.*

Now what do we do? How can I ensure this thievery isn't repeated so that Daniel won't be blamed again?

If she knew anything about livestock rustling, she would have done her best to help, but she was in the dark when it came to such affairs. She could ask her father for help, though.

With his expansive knowledge about farming and ranching, he would know how to prevent thieves from breaking into the ranch.

She stroked Daniel's arms, feeling pity for him. Although they'd experienced a setback, they could find a way through this just like they had done with others.

She would help her husband, she just needed to figure out how.

But Travis's words came back to her, replayed in her mind, and caused a heavy weight to rest on her chest. He'd implied that she was a distraction, that she wasn't letting Daniel perform his duties effectively.

His words didn't hurt as much as the harried look on her husband's face when his uncle blamed him for the loss. Guilt. Sadness. Confusion. It was heartbreaking.

She couldn't help feeling a bit guilty for distracting him. They'd bonded a lot as husband and wife in the past few weeks, and they'd communicated when they should have been working. They'd ridden so much that it seemed they spent most of their time relaxing.

Still, she'd been helping with the ranch tasks. She'd surely improved the state of the property.

Her flower garden had started growing. Nobody was complaining about the eggs being broken, and she'd learned other necessary tasks, too.

However, they'd slept late because they had been having a wonderful time by the stream the previous night. Would it have made any difference if they'd woken earlier?

Rachel wondered when the animals were stolen. They could have been taken in the middle of the night or at dawn.

She couldn't help but feel that if Daniel had woken early enough, as was his custom, the theft wouldn't have happened.

They walked to the dining room to have breakfast, holding hands. She found comfort in the way their hands clung together, the way the skin of their arms rubbed as they walked.

It reassured her that they would face this storm together. They would solve this problem.

When they got to the dining room, Travis was sitting at the table and drinking a glass of whiskey. He never drank whiskey in the morning.

The ranch hands were there, but no one was talking. It was as if somebody had passed on before they all arrived to eat breakfast.

She hugged Daniel and rubbed his back before going into the kitchen. She hoped the embrace conveyed what she hadn't been able to say in words—*we'll get through this, we'll find a way, I'm here with you.*

She hurried into the kitchen and helped Adeline prepare breakfast. It was a simple meal of sandwiches, coffee, juice, and eggs.

Rachel tried to talk to the older woman to cheer her up, but the housekeeper couldn't concentrate on the conversation. She offered a sad smile and made Rachel sing a song with her before continuing to make the food.

Once they were done, they served breakfast and went on to eat. A solemn mood hung over the farmhouse. The table wasn't filled with its usual chatter.

From the looks on their faces, everyone was deeply bothered by the morning's incident. Travis, especially, kept glaring at her. He didn't try to hide his animosity.

No matter how hard she tried, her mind kept drifting to the thievery.

How had three animals been stolen so easily? The animals would have made some noise. Why hadn't anyone heard?

She should have checked the barn to see what had gone wrong. Maybe the others had checked and had not noticed what she would have.

As a seamstress, she had an eye for detail and could notice minute things that might help solve the mystery behind the theft. She resolved to check the barn as soon as she finished eating.

But she'd lost her appetite and a wave of nausea had hit her. She couldn't bring herself to eat any more eggs or sandwiches.

She drank some lemon juice, but the citrus taste made some bile rise in her stomach.

"Rachel?" Adeline said.

Rachel started.

The housekeeper was looking at her, concern etched on her features. "Are you alright?"

"I... Pardon me." She stood up and walked out of the dining room. She couldn't eat anyway, so it was better to search for what had gone wrong while they were asleep.

Once she was outside Travis's house and away from his constant glare, Rachel quickened her pace. In the barn, she tried to think amid the loud bleating of the sheep and goats and the mooing of the cows.

She scrutinized the surroundings, but nothing seemed amiss. She walked around the building to check if anybody had drilled holes into the sides, but there was no such thing.

Back in the barn, she checked the stalls again. They were all properly locked.

Rachel wanted to release the animals so that they could graze. However, she'd herded the animals alone for the first time yesterday and the theft had occurred.

After she'd ensured each animal was secure in their stalls, she'd left.

She was sure not one animal had been left straying. But if she sent them out today, George might remember that and Travis would somehow level an accusation on her.

She decided to let them be.

Bernard and George walked up to the barn and began to herd the animals out. They opened the stalls, sent the animals to the field, and relocked them.

Then, they closed the barn door and locked it up.

Something about the locking and unlocking caught Rachel's attention. The ranch hands had performed an action she felt she had missed the

previous day.

She watched them closely until it hit her with such force that her eyes widened and her jaw hung open.

She hadn't locked the barn!

"Oh no!"

She replayed yesterday's activities in her head over and over. There was no recollection of her turning the key in the lock. She'd closed the door but had somehow forgotten to lock it.

The rustlers had succeeded because of her careless mistake. There had been no need for them to break in. They'd simply opened the barn door and walked inside.

Then, it was a matter of climbing into the stalls with their short doors if they didn't want to cause a racket by breaking into each stall.

Without pausing, she fled into the farmhouse. When she reached the dining room, she stopped, panting. Travis and Daniel had some ledgers and slates spread out on the table.

"I need to tell you something," she said to her husband.

She kept her voice low. The urgency in her tone made Daniel shoot to his feet. He followed her to the sitting room. The linking door to the dining room was ajar.

"Are you alright?" He scrutinized her with his gaze. "Did something happen?"

"Let's talk in private," she said, motioning to Travis, who was staring at her from where he sat on the other end of the table.

"Just whisper it," Daniel replied. "He won't hear."

She looked at the older man again. He probably wouldn't hear it since he was too far away.

"I forgot to lock the barn yesterday when I brought in the animals."

Daniel's eyes widened, then he hit his lap with his fist. "Why this, now?"

Rachel took a step toward him, placing her hand on his shoulder. She looked up at him. "Daniel..."

"You...what?" Travis said.

Rachel froze. Her uncle-in-law had stood up and was glaring at her. His voice was low, calm. His gaze focused steadily on her, icy coldness radiating from his eyes.

Instinctively, she took a step back and unknowingly knocked over a small pitcher of water. It fell to the ground, shattering into pieces. Rachel winced at the sound.

Adeline rushed into the room. "What happened?"

"Rachel did the rustlers a favor by deciding not to lock the barn," Travis spat. If looks could kill, he would have buried her six feet under at this moment.

Three pairs of eyes fixed on her, frozen. Nobody moved. The room was so silent, her heartbeat seemed too loud in her ears.

Rachel wrung her hands. "I didn't mean to... I herded the animals in, and I must have forgotten to lock the barn. I didn't mean to."

Her voice sounded weak to her ears. She stared at her feet. How could she have made such a silly mistake?

She'd insisted on sending the animals in because she wanted so badly to prove she was useful. Instead, she'd made a costly error.

She didn't know what else to say to redeem herself before Travis. It was as if she had loaded a gun and placed it in his hands with directions to shoot her. Now, she was at his mercy.

"You left the barn open on purpose, didn't you?" he asked, coming toward her.

Her eyes widened. With a wobbling voice, she said, "Please. It wasn't intentional. You have to believe me. It was an innocent mistake."

But Travis wasn't listening to her. He was like a predator homing in on his prey. He stopped in front of her, arms akimbo.

"You stole the animals, Rachel."

Rachel gaped at her husband's uncle in shock. How could he think such a thing? She shook her head.

"No. Why would I? I didn't."

"You did."

For the first time since she'd married Daniel, she felt a wave of blazing anger toward his uncle. How could he accuse her of such a thing?

How did leaving the barn open and stealing the animals mean the same thing? Her father had raised no thief and she wouldn't let Travis accuse her of such.

She laughed in disbelief. "I didn't steal the animals. I don't know why you would even think of such a thing. You claim to desire respect, but you treat people harshly.

"Respect is reciprocal. How could you descend so low to accuse me of a crime I couldn't have committed when I was sleeping beside my husband?"

Travis smirked, his eyes filled with disgust. "Who said you stole the

animals with your bare hands? You stole them with the help of other people.

"I dare say that you've been planning to deplete this ranch of its resources ever since you arrived."

Rachel looked from Travis to Daniel to Adeline. Daniel and Adeline seemed to be frozen in shock. As soon as Rachel's eyes caught the housekeeper's, Adeline looked down and pretended to start wiping the already clean table.

She had to stand up to Travis. She could feel her legs shaking, tears rising within her, but she resolved to be strong.

She stood tall, squaring her shoulders. She breathed in slowly, in and out.

"I came from New York to marry Daniel. I've never lived in Texas, so there's no way I would know anybody capable of stealing from a ranch."

Travis appeared unconvinced, so she switched to pleading with him.

"Uncle Travis, please, look at things from my point of view. What will I gain from stealing from my own husband's ranch? Would I give what belongs to us to someone else?"

The older man shook his head. "No rustlers have attacked this farm in eons. You arrive in Fort Worth, and this happens.

"I'm still figuring out how you implemented it, but I'm sure you're behind this."

Rachel's lips trembled as she realized she could never convince her uncle-in-law of her innocence. Travis had never liked her.

He'd barely even acknowledged her existence despite all her efforts to please him. Well, that was his choice. But accusing her of thievery?

That was preposterous!

"I didn't steal anything. I would never do such a thing!"

Her eyes clouded with angry tears. His judgment of her was so unfair. She had never stolen anything, even when she'd starved after her father had lost everything.

How could Travis accuse her of such a thing? How dare he! Tears rolled down her cheeks. How could she expect him to accept her if he considered her a mere thief?

Daniel stepped in front of her as if trying to protect her from his uncle's misdirected anger. "Uncle Travis, stop this."

"Think, Daniel. You've always been logical. Can't you see what's happening?"

"Rachel didn't steal anything. You're accusing my wife falsely again."

Travis scoffed. "You think the effect of her evil deeds stops at stealing? Oh, she's done far more than that, but let me stick to one point.

"She's creating a rift in this family, instead of bringing more unity. Since she came, you and I have not had a fruitful discussion.

"Several things have gone wrong because of her, and still, you refuse to see the truth."

Pain welled in Rachel's heart at the onslaught of his words. She shut her eyes briefly, trying to quell her emotions.

She'd failed.

She'd left all she knew to pursue her dreams of having a family. Instead, she'd caused friction between her husband and his uncle.

A sob escaped her throat and more tears erupted. As she cried,

Daniel's voice rose.

"Rachel hasn't been creating any rift. Instead, she's been defending you when you're wrong. Uncle Travis, if you examine this situation, you'll conclude that you're wrong.

"You're accusing Rachel of a crime she didn't commit just because she made a mistake. You've also never accepted her as my wife, yet you say she's the one destroying the relationship between you and me."

Unable to control herself any longer, Rachel ran out of the house, weeping. Daniel and Travis's raised voices became fainter the farther away she got from the house.

She didn't stop until she got to the safety of her room. Hugging herself, she wept.

Travis disliked her, and for a reason she wasn't responsible for. The ranch hands might blame her, too—after all, it was her insistence that had made George entrust the task into her hands.

She'd failed to do the right thing.

She'd failed her husband.

Rachel wished there was someone to comfort her. Her aunt came to mind. She should send her a letter—she was a woman who was experienced in marriage affairs.

Her aunt would know the right thing to do.

She suddenly remembered getting a reply from the woman days before. She'd somehow forgotten to read the letter.

She searched for the missive in her box, but she couldn't find it. Maybe she'd mistakenly placed it in her desk drawer.

She went on to look for it there and in other parts of the room. The

letter was nowhere to be found.

Where had she put it? She couldn't ask Daniel where she dropped it as she'd been alone when she kept the letter. But she had to get advice from someone.

She didn't want to see Daniel arguing with his uncle because of her.

Wiping her tears, she sat down to pen a letter to her father instead. He always knew the right thing to do. Dipping the feather into the ink, she started:

Dear Father,

Something terrible has happened.

He should have seen this coming.

He should have known that once something went wrong on the ranch, Travis would put all the blame on his wife.

Despite his anger at his uncle, Daniel couldn't help but feel that somehow, this whole debacle was his fault. He'd burdened Rachel with too much work.

In just a few months, he'd taught her what most people learned in years. He'd felt so much pressure by his uncle's description of her as a city girl who couldn't handle farm duties that he'd wanted to prove that notion wrong at all costs.

It had seemed like she could handle it, and he'd happily watched as she excelled at her chores. He should have known it was only a matter of time before she became overwhelmed and forgetful.

Who else would learn to ride a horse, cook, handle the hens and eggs in the chicken coop, grow the vegetables, feed and herd the animals, and clean the ranch without making a mistake? Nobody could learn all of those as fast as Rachel had without having a mishap.

He should have introduced the tasks slowly and one at a time. He should have concentrated only on the chicken coop before moving to the flower garden and horse riding.

If he'd done this earlier, she wouldn't have herded the animals in and

left the barn open.

He wished he could go back to that moment when he'd taught her to herd the livestock. She'd insisted and he'd succumbed, instead of telling her he didn't want her going near the cows. Now, she was in trouble for a small mistake that had led to thievery.

Daniel stepped outside the farmhouse in an attempt to clear his head. Arguing with his uncle had yielded no results; Travis still held firmly to the belief that Rachel was responsible for the theft.

He clenched his jaw. How ludicrous! There was no way Rachel could have stolen from them. She wouldn't have done that. Why would she?

His uncle's claim that she was somehow involved with the rustlers sounded utterly ridiculous. It had taken a lot of willpower for Daniel to keep his anger in check.

Now, he had to comfort his wife because Travis had made her unhappy again.

He hoped she wouldn't be too emotionally distraught. He could embrace her, kiss her, maybe take her someplace off the ranch where they could be alone later in the day.

Rachel was in her room when he arrived at the cottage.

Her eyes were red-rimmed as she looked up at him. She'd stopped crying, but her face was filled with so much sadness that it hurt him.

He'd expected to meet her crying her eyes out and giving in to the hurt caused by Travis. Instead, she sat at the desk, writing a letter.

He stared at her suspiciously, remembering the letter from Steven he'd seen some time ago. Who was she writing to? Was she writing to this man he didn't know?

It dawned on him that Rachel had never talked to him about Steven.

He hadn't bothered to ask her because he'd expected her to tell him in her own time.

But it seemed that no time would ever be convenient for her to divulge what she had to do with this Steven. She never intended to let him know.

Suspicions flittered into his mind. How could she have been corresponding with an unknown man for several weeks without caring to let Daniel know?

Was his uncle right? Had Rachel been working with this Steven to steal their animals?

He tried to shake it off, to create an excuse for her, but that was the only reason that came to his mind. If he was wrong, then why else would Rachel be writing such a letter?

He decided to ask her. "Who are you writing to?"

Rachel sniffed a few times. She stopped writing and turned to look at him, eyes wide. Her hands were fidgeting as she looked from him to the paper.

Daniel peeked at the letter. Beside it was another open letter that had the name Steven at the bottom.

So, he had been right. She was writing to this man she'd refused to tell him about again, and from her reaction to his question, it wasn't an innocent thing to do.

"I'm writing to... I'm writing to my father," she said, unable to meet his eyes. She rushed on. "I've been corresponding with him for a while now.

"I was looking for an opportunity to tell you, but the right time never came up."

Daniel paused, confused. The next thought that came to him was: *Rachel is talking to her father?* Her explanation didn't add up. He sat down on the bed, so he could think properly.

During their correspondence, she'd told him she hadn't spoken to her father in years. She'd mentioned that she had last seen him when she was sixteen.

If she hadn't seen or heard from her Pa in years, how come she was comfortably exchanging missives with him, and had gotten to the point where she would experience some mishap on the ranch and her first thought would be to write to him?

He realized he hadn't even known her father's name until he saw the letter peeking out of the desk drawer that fateful day.

From the beginning of their correspondence, he hadn't asked about her pa because he hadn't wanted her to remember how he'd painfully abandoned her.

But now that he thought of it, he should have. She would have told him something akin to the truth then, and he would have compared that information to what she was saying at the moment.

For all he knew, this Steven might not be her father. If he were, then it made things much worse than Travis's accusation.

It made him feel that his wife had lashed out at him with a heavy whip of lies and deceit. He could already feel his chest constricting in pain.

His mouth was beginning to taste sour just from the thoughts roiling in his mind, just like he envisioned that whatever his wife said next might make their marriage go sour.

He closed his eyes for several minutes, contemplating how to have this conversation gently with his wife. After a futile attempt, he snorted.

Rachel had been the one to hide the existence of a Steven, of her father. Why should he be trying to talk to her gently if she couldn't even be honest with him?

He opened his eyes to see that she was staring intently at him.

"Daniel," she said, but he didn't answer.

She stood up from the desk and came to sit beside him. He scooted away to the far end of the bed. He decided to ask her whatever came to his mind, gentleness be damned!

"You said you hadn't heard from your father in a long time. Why are you communicating now?"

He heard her sharp intake of breath. She opened her mouth and closed it, then she looked away. She was bracing herself to tell him something.

Daniel waited. Whatever she said next would help him reevaluate the foundation of their marriage.

He'd thought their bond was strong, but if she'd been secretive, she either didn't trust him or was doing worse things behind his back. He didn't want to believe it was the latter, but he had a nagging suspicion it was.

She'd hidden her knowledge of her father's whereabouts from the beginning of their relationship. After arriving at Hickman Ranch, she'd not bothered to tell Daniel that they'd been corresponding for several months.

He felt a ball of dread settle in his stomach. He felt like he was falling into a well filled with distrust.

If he hadn't found Rachel writing a letter, she wouldn't have told him about her recent correspondence with her father. What more was she hiding?

Who was this woman he'd married?

Maybe his uncle was right. The older man had used his wisdom to warn him, but Daniel had simply been stubborn, only focusing on the joy of getting married.

If Travis was right about the damage women caused, then Daniel would have been better off not getting a wife. He shouldn't have hurried to marry Rachel since she was not only a female but was also a city girl.

He noticed she hadn't given her a reply after his last question. He said, his tone growing harsh, "You've not answered my question."

Her breath hitched, and her words came out slowly and in a measured way. She was looking at him as if to gauge his reaction to know what to say next.

"My father is in Texas. When I got to the ranch, I reached out to him in a final attempt at knowing for sure if he was still in the state. He... he wrote back, and we've been corresponding ever since."

Daniel let the words sink in. She'd known all along that her father was in Texas.

It was vital information she'd conveniently omitted from her missives. He wondered if she'd applied to his advertisement because he lived in the same state as her father.

The desire to love hadn't drawn her to him as she'd said in her letter. She'd simply used her mind of cold logic to pick a man that lived close to her father.

"All the letters we were exchanging, our correspondence, our marriage, everything was built on lies. You came to Texas because of him." It was a statement, not a question.

Rachel shot to her feet, her eyes apologetic. She walked to him and

held his hand.

Daniel stiffened. Where her palm used to be warm, he could only feel cold sipping in.

He inhaled her flowery scent and thought of rose bushes with the petals fallen off, leaving only the thorns to prick and injure anybody that touched the plants.

Perhaps that was what Rachel was like.

He stood to walk to the door.

"Daniel."

She sounded deeply troubled; her face looked harried.

A ball of pity and desire grew within him. He stood by the wall, the solidness anchoring him to reality.

He would give her the chance to offer an explanation, but that was it. He wouldn't let her slimy touch or her smooth voice deceive him.

"No, Daniel," she said. "I didn't come to Fort Worth because of my father. I came here to marry you.

"We have a wonderful marriage based on love and happiness. Yes, things have gone bad occasionally, but our bond has pulled us through."

Daniel scoffed. It was far too convenient. First, she hadn't told him anything about her father being in Texas, then, she'd started writing to the man.

She'd had the intention of using her marriage to Daniel to correspond with her pa from the start, or she would have spoken to him about it.

How could he trust her now? If he hadn't asked, she would have kept

him in the dark about her father.

"How can I trust you? You've been hiding things from me, Rachel. How do I know you haven't been lying all along?"

His wife looked like she was near tears, but he wasn't moved.

"Believe me, I didn't reply to your advert because of him. I didn't. I've always longed to have a wonderful husband who loves me and whom I can love. When I saw that you have the qualities I desired, I accepted your marriage proposal."

Daniel frowned, shaking his head at her in disbelief. He wondered why he had to listen to all these tales from the woman who called herself his wife.

He'd had enough of her falsehoods, so he left the cottage.

He walked away from Hickman Ranch and strode through the prairie, anger coursing through him.

He'd gone to the cottage to comfort Rachel and apologize for Travis's grave accusations. Instead, he'd caught her in a lie, which proved his uncle's statement that he shouldn't trust her.

How could he defend her if he doubted her?

When he felt calmer, he went back to the ranch. Setting his anger aside, he approached the barn. He would deal with personal matters later.

Right now, he had to figure out a way to tighten security and prevent further theft.

The ranch hands were standing around while the animals grazed from the forage. He called them over and began.

"Before I tell you what I've planned, have you come up with a plan to

improve security and prevent the incident that occurred today?"

Bernard shook his head.

"The barn was open," George pointed out. "I didn't want to say it earlier because we all know how Travis gets when he hears about such matters."

Daniel narrowed his eyes. "Noted."

Although George hadn't told his uncle about the barn not being locked, Rachel had outed herself. Besides, he didn't need a reminder of his wife's error. They were equally at fault.

"Now, do you have a plan that will ensure that no animal is stolen in the future?" he asked George.

The ranch hand was silent, so Daniel continued speaking.

"The first thing we need to do is survey the ranch. Check for break-ins, anything out of the ordinary. To prevent this from happening again, we have to discover how they got in.

"Uncle Travis found out that some traps were tampered with, and the thieves covered their tracks before leaving. But we might see something else he didn't notice.

"Go along the fence and reset the traps. Also, ensure that the fences are strong. We'll need to watch over the ranch in shifts every night.

"Two people will stay up at night. One will start watching the animals from dusk till midnight while the second person will take over till dawn.

"Henceforth, no one else should be assigned the task of feeding or catering to the flock. It has become your full responsibility, and if one person herds the livestock in, the other person should double-check to ensure that the stalls and barn are properly locked."

His gaze drifted to the fence. "We've suffered a huge loss. We can't let this happen again."

Even as he uttered those words, his mind conjured an image of Rachel hunched over a desk, scribbling a letter to a father that had mysteriously reappeared in her life.

The seeds of doubts had been planted and germinated. The tree of doubt was already growing, shooting up to the sky at an alarming rate.

O n a normal day, the sun setting in the sky would have been a beautiful sight to behold.

With all that had been happening on Hickman Ranch, Rachel wasn't looking at the colors in the sky—and even if she had, the sharp and continuous bleating of livestock destroyed the calmness it brought.

She looked up from the clothes she'd been mending in the cottage, immediately noting that an animal was in distress.

Another thought came to her mind—what if it was being carted away by force?

Rachel jumped off and ran out of the cottage. As she ran in the direction of the bleating that had not yet stopped, she saw Bernard and George riding toward the fence.

Adeline and Travis had come from the farmhouse and were making their way in the same direction. Some other goats had joined in the bleating.

Daniel had just arrived from an errand and stirred the horses, wagon and all, toward the sound.

While she was still far off, Rachel saw a hefty dark-haired man scrambling up the wooden section of the fence while another man with brown hair was putting their goat in the back of a wagon parked close to the barbed wire section.

A shot rang in the air. Travis cocked his gun, pointed it to the sky, and shot again. A few frightened animals nearby ran off.

“Shoot them,” he shouted. “Shoot them, now!”

The brown-haired man was already in the wagon, gesturing to his partner to hurry. The hefty man fell on the floor, stood up, and climbed into the wagon. Then, they drove off.

“Go after them, this minute,” Travis said to Daniel and continued hurrying toward the fence.

“Where are your guns? Do you think your guns are only to be used at night?” he said to the ranch hands. He beckoned Bernard to come toward him.

When the ranch hand rode over, Travis handed the gun over to him. “Bring those rustlers and my goat to me.”

Bernard joined Daniel and they drove out of the ranch.

Rachel took the last few steps to the section of the fence where the goat had been stolen. The ground had footprints of a goat being dragged. There was another footprint of a boot.

The footprint of the goat started from a section of the field close to the fence and ended abruptly at the point where the traps began. The human footprint continued to the fence.

Rachel noted that all the traps around that area had been sprung.

Travis and Adeline were examining the area just like she was. George was standing, looking down with his shoulders stooped.

Through the barbed wire, Rachel could see Daniel chasing after the thieves. She watched them until they drove out of sight.

After several minutes of checking the ground, traps, and fence, Travis

turned to George. "Tell me what happened."

"I was about to herd the animals when I heard the goat bleating in distress. When I looked up, I saw that a lasso had been tied to the goat's head and two men who were just inside the ranch, inside the wooden fence, were dragging the goat using the lasso.

"I ran to them, shouting, but they focused on the task and ignored me. After the goat was beside them, the slimmer man climbed the fence and landed on the other side. Then he told the fatter man to bring the goat over.

"The man picked up the goat. It took a while because he was trying to get used to the weight of the goat, but since it was a kid, he got it lifted up to the fence.

"The goat resisted, but the other man on the other side of the fence dragged the rope while the fat man pushed it up. Eventually, they hefted the goat to the other side.

"By the time I got here, the fat man was already climbing up. I could only get a hold of his shoe. He kicked it off and scrambled up, then he jumped down on the side and they got in the wagon and left."

"If you had your gun with you, you would have caught one or both of them," Travis said. He motioned to the gelding, who was close to the barn.

"Bring that horse. I'm going to report the theft to the sheriff. He can help me find all the people behind the stealing of the animals," he said, giving Rachel a pointed look.

She sighed, knowing that her uncle-in-law was accusing her of this theft despite what he had seen.

After that, Travis left while George herded the frightened animals in. Adeline went back to the kitchen, but Rachel couldn't go back to mending clothes.

All she could think was that another animal had been stolen. This time around, the theft hadn't occurred in the middle of the night or just before they woke up in the morning.

The rustlers had come in broad daylight, before they'd even herded the animals in. Those thieves were becoming audacious or desperate or both.

Rachel didn't like the result that had brought.

The tension at the ranch had been so thick since the animals had been stolen ten days ago. A knife could cut through it.

Everyone was at alert, and security had been tightened. Daniel, Travis, and the ranch hands took turns guarding the ranch. The barn was locked all the time—Rachel checked often.

The measures they'd put in place had been successful because the thieves hadn't stolen throughout that period. She'd hoped they wouldn't only guard the animals left in the ranch, but they would somehow find the stolen animals.

Daniel had gone in search of the sheep and goat. He'd checked at fairs and had asked around, but there had been no indication of the animals or any livestock with the ranch brand—a circle with an H and the symbol of fire.

Unfortunately, those same security methods had done nothing to deter the rustlers. Now that they'd attacked a second time, Rachel's hope dwindled.

The thieves had become innovative, using lassos and climbing over fences. She wondered what they would do next and how the ranchers would treat her after this loss.

She knew Adeline would always be warm toward her. Though the housekeeper couldn't speak out for her because she was working under Travis's employ, she always comforted Rachel, assuring her she

would never believe Rachel had the capacity to steal from the ranch.

Bernard and George had always been neutral. She wasn't sure what they thought of her, but they'd ensured she'd had nothing to do with the animals since the first thievery.

It seemed they were careful not to anger Daniel by accusing her and at the same time they didn't stick up for her because of Travis.

She'd caught George especially eyeing her carefully or following her at a distance when she was alone in the field. She didn't want to think too much of it as she had more pressing matters and more important people to convince of her innocence.

Travis treated her with suspicion and accused her openly now. He didn't hide what he thought of her and was always speaking out about who he thought was engineering the stealing going on in his ranch.

However, he never called her names or spoke to her directly. Sometimes, he looked at her when he talked about the thief, implying that he was talking to or speaking about her. At other times, he gestured in her direction.

His actions didn't feel as painful as they'd been when she first arrived at the ranch. However, there was a dull ache in her heart whenever Travis referred to her as the culprit.

She wished she and the older man could have the same relationship she had with her father. But as the days went by, that dream deadened, and she lost hope that it would ever happen.

The most hurtful reaction was Daniel's. In the past, he'd defended her to his uncle. But after he found out about her correspondence with her father, he'd kept her at arm's length.

He was distant and cold and never told Travis that she was innocent. When his uncle's accusations became too much and she had to leave his presence, her husband remained quiet and never came to see how

she was doing. It was disheartening.

Now that this theft had occurred and Daniel had witnessed it, she hoped he would realize there was no way she could collaborate with those men.

She hoped he would at least defend her in front of his uncle even if he no longer held her in his warm embrace or slept in the same bed with her.

Rachel couldn't stay in her cottage alone thinking of the thieves after all that had happened that day. She opted to go to the kitchen and sit by the warmth of the fire while Adeline prepared supper.

She hoped the woman would cheer her up with some gossip or other conversation.

By the time supper was ready, the ambiance in the ranch was still sullen. Despair hung over the environment like a dark cloud, snuffing out the bliss and joyous laughter that had once filled the place.

Rachel wasn't hungry, so she decided to wait for Travis, Daniel, and Bernard to get back. Adeline and George said that they would wait, too.

Travis came back first, his horse galloping fiercely onto the ranch.

They went to meet him, and he said, "I met the sheriff in his home. He said there's nothing he can do about it now.

"It's already getting dark, and the thieves could have gone in one thousand and one directions. If he starts looking for them tonight, he might never find them. He promised to start investigating the theft tomorrow."

Travis came down from the horse and handed the reins to George. He looked like he had aged a few years in the past few days. Rachel felt pity for him.

Daniel had told her his uncle had lost his farm to a fire years earlier and had started again from scratch. It must have been difficult for Travis to see his animals being stolen.

He could be likening the loss from the theft to the loss from the fire.

The older man shook his head. "I wanted to handle this theft privately by either catching the thieves or making sure they don't steal the animals, but that's not possible anymore.

"Now that I've told the sheriff, he'll go around asking questions and people will know they can steal successfully from Hickman ranch. Hopefully, there are no other rustlers around that will make any further attempts at taking our animals."

He heaved a sigh and looked around. "Where are Daniel and Bernard? Haven't they come back?"

Since they hadn't yet returned, they went in to have supper while George took the horse to its shed. They ate in silence.

Afterward, Rachel and Adeline cleared the dishes, and Rachel took some food out for Daniel and dropped it at the cottage. She'd already started dozing off when the men returned.

She went outside to find out what had happened with the rustlers. Immediately, she noticed they looked sad and Bernard occasionally glanced at the back of the wagon.

She tried to peek but saw nothing.

Travis, Adeline, and George had come out.

"Did you catch them?" Travis asked.

"No," Daniel said. "But we got the goat back."

While Daniel talked, Bernard went to the back of the carriage and

opened it. Travis smiled and patted his nephew on the back. Daniel shook his head, his head down.

“What’s wrong?” the older man asked.

Just then, Adeline gave a frightened scream. Bernard carried the kid out to them. Its tongue hung out of its mouth; the animal was dead. Startled, Rachel gasped.

“We chased the thieves for a long while. We were shooting at them. One of our bullets hit the goat and it died.

“When the thieves got to the cliff, one of them threw the dead goat on the ground and they drove down to the valley. We had to stop to see if the goat was still alive.”

Travis’s face filled with sadness. “We can’t eat it now or sell it. It’s such a waste, all because these thieves decided to take what is rightfully ours.”

Daniel was still silent, not saying anything. Rachel guessed how he was feeling. He’d gone after the rustlers and hadn’t been able to catch them.

Now, they had a dead goat in their hands and no arrested thief to show for it.

They walked to the section of land behind the barn. George and Bernard dug up a grave for the animal while Adeline held the lamp, and they buried it.

After the burial, Travis stood for a long time staring into space and thinking. Everybody patiently waited for him. After a long while, he seemed to recollect himself.

“There’s just one thing that baffles me,” he said, looking at Daniel. “Nobody knows we have a wooden fence in this ranch. The fence is at a part of the land we hardly ever go to.

“It’s hidden by trees on the outside and by buildings on the inside, so visitors won’t be able to see it. But it seems these thieves know our secret. I’d like to know how they found out.”

“We’ll find out,” Daniel replied. “I’ll make sure we do.”

With that, they walked back to their houses to retire for the night. Rachel kept glancing at her husband. He looked solemn.

As soon as they entered the cottage, he sat on the couch and stared into the distance. She sat beside him and placed her palm on his hand, but he removed his hand from under hers.

She schooled her features not to show how hurt she was by his reaction. Maybe he was tired and would be comforted when he got something to eat.

Rachel took the tray of food she’d saved for Daniel from the top of the cupboard and placed it before him. He didn’t smile at her or even look at her.

This was similar to how he’d been treating her ever since they talked about Steven.

He’d become so busy with the ranch that they had little time to speak. And when they did, it felt awkward—like they were two strangers forced to tolerate each other’s presence.

But she’d thought today’s ordeal would bring down her husband’s guard and make him accept her show of affection.

Rachel wished for the earlier days. Things had been much better, and her marriage wasn’t strained. The love they had for each other had shone through. She’d been elated, happy.

She’d also been productive. Even Travis had been more cordial toward her. Although they weren’t completely on good terms, he hadn’t been openly hostile.

She sighed. "You didn't have supper, so I decided to keep something for you."

He glanced at her briefly. "Thank you."

Rachel didn't know which was the better option: to sit with him in silence or go to her room and think about how things had gone so wrong.

He didn't seem angry at her, but he wasn't warming up to her, either. Gone were the easy conversations they used to have.

She had to say something. She was talking to her husband, after all, and they needed to find a way to speak to each other even when things weren't rosy.

She swallowed, looking for a topic to start with, something that would cheer him up.

"How did today go?"

As soon as the words came out, she knew she'd said the wrong thing.

Despite his withdrawal, she'd continued making attempts at conversing with him before they went to bed.

She never succeeded—either he gave one-word answers, or he said nothing at all. She was starting to feel invisible.

Right now, she'd caught his attention, but his glare wasn't the reaction she'd been hoping for.

"The rustlers attacked. You already know that."

Not missing the edge in his tone, she bit her lip. Was he angry at her or at the rustlers? She wasn't quite sure.

"All right," she said.

Perhaps it was better if she refrained from speaking. Her hands brushed his cheeks, she tried to communicate how much she cared without words.

He looked away but didn't remove her hands. He was neither welcoming her nor stopping her. As she drew near to hug him, he stood up hastily and lit a lamp.

"I'm going to bed," he said without looking at her.

She watched him go, her heart hurting. When he was at his room door, she opened her mouth and tried one last time.

"I've missed us sleeping in the same bed."

She stood up to start walking toward him, but before she could take a step forward, he said, "Rachel, I'd like to be alone tonight. I need to think."

With that, he walked into his room and shut the door after him.

Rachel sat back on the sofa, frustrated. She would give anything to return to how she and Daniel used to be. She just wanted them to be happy again.

She took the burning lamp and went into her room. There, she changed her clothes and lay on the bed. Her heart was heavy.

Try as she might, she couldn't sleep. She closed her eyes, but after several minutes of tossing and turning, she opened them to realize that she was still awake, and it was still night.

After she'd opened her eyes more than once, she huffed and sat up. She would have to do something rather than try to force the sleep that had eluded her.

She'd picked up two letters from the post office earlier in the day. One was from Charlotte; the other was from her father.

She'd not had the time to read them, so she decided now was as good a time as any. She opened her box and picked out the letters.

She decided to start with Charlotte's. Her friend had gotten engaged to Eric—they were no longer just friends. They were courting and would be getting married in the fall.

Rachel smiled. She was genuinely happy for Charlotte. Besides, this was good news in the midst of all the bad things that had happened.

Afterward, she unfolded her pa's letter.

My dear daughter,

From your last letter, I deduced that you aren't welcome at the ranch. I am very much against staying in a place you aren't wanted, so I suggest you leave.

I want the best for you, Rachel. Daniel isn't that. You shouldn't stay with a man whose family doesn't accept you. Accusing you of thievery is the height of it!

Do not tarry in the ranch any longer. I have a suitor for you.

He's a gentleman who will love, cherish, and appreciate you. He has a bigger ranch, too, so your acquired skills in handling chores will be of good use.

I want you to fulfill your dream of building a family of your own. You can't do that with Daniel. I suggest you leave immediately and come to a place where your value is appreciated.

With utmost concern,

Steven McAllister

Rachel read the letter again with growing disappointment. She couldn't fathom that her father was giving her such advice. He'd become so flitting and dishonorable.

She remembered when she was younger and her ma was still alive. Pa and Ma stuck with each other through thick and thin.

Their love and marriage stood strong through the good and bad times. Moreover, they always preached to her to work out her marriage for good.

But the letter she'd read didn't sound anything like what her pa would

say. Leave Daniel? How could he think such a thing?

That sounded like another man's words, not Steven's. He was even trying to pawn her off to someone else. What rubbish!

Rachel tossed the letter on the drawer like it had been poisoned. She didn't want to leave her husband. She hadn't written to her father to get such a solution.

She'd only wanted him to encourage her so that she would find the courage to keep working on her relationship with her husband until things got better.

Instead, she'd gotten entirely different advice.

What had happened to her pa? It seemed the hardships of life had made him discard his values.

She had to see him, whether Daniel and Travis approved or not, so she could talk some sense into him. She would ask him several pertinent questions and tell him she had no intention of leaving Daniel.

Things might be difficult right now, but she was determined to work it out. Leaving would only prove her uncle-in-law right.

She wouldn't give him the pleasure of seeing her abandon her husband due to unforeseen circumstances. Besides, if she left, it would only prove her guilt.

No, she would stay. Though Daniel was mad at her, she wouldn't leave him.

They would make their marriage work. They had to.

Staying was the only choice she had, not just to stand by her husband, but to clear her name. Only then would she be able to live in peace.

Rachel clenched her fist. She couldn't sit around hoping someone

would catch the rustlers. She had to do something.

She'd investigate the thievery, then confront her pa.

As she started thinking of how to go about it, fatigue came upon her. The stress from the day's events finally took its toll and she found her eyelids closing of their own volition.

Tomorrow, I'll make a plan and find out who the thieves are.



At dawn the next day, Travis had a shooting practice with Daniel and the ranch hands. While they worked on their shooting range and accuracy, Rachel cooked in the kitchen and went to the chicken coop to start her chores.

Luckily, the men had picked a strategic spot that was farthest away from the birds for their target practice. The sound of the explosives could make the chickens go into shock and die, so Travis had decided to act with caution.

Thankfully, from where Rachel picked the eggs in the coop, the sound of the guns was muted. However, she hoped that one day, she would be able to go and watch Daniel practicing.

After breakfast, she went to complete the clothes mending, the thought of the thieves on her mind. She wondered what she would do to catch the rustlers.

They were two men who were bigger and stronger than her. They could jump over the fence, something she couldn't do.

Still, Rachel wanted to help Daniel and the ranch hands.

She didn't like the mood on Hickman Ranch. She also disliked how her husband acted recently, how he didn't seem to want to have anything to do with her.

If she caught the thieves personally, she would be exonerated.

Although she couldn't possibly catch the thief herself, she resolved to investigate. When she saw any of the rustlers, she would call on Daniel, Bernard, or George, and they would help her to apprehend the criminals.

Throughout that day, Rachel thought of ways by which she would call for help when she saw the thieves. They'd experienced their worst the previous day, and she would make sure it didn't happen again.



Rachel had thought things couldn't get much worse. Two weeks later, she realized she'd been wrong.

Animals were stolen from the ranch every few days. The livestock was dwindling. Every night, Daniel returned to the cottage with stooped shoulders and a weary expression.

Except for Travis, who had a more lenient schedule because he was older, the males on Hickman Ranch weren't getting enough sleep as they were constantly on shift.

She wanted so badly to comfort her husband, but she wasn't sure how. She hugged him and gave him his favorite food when she could.

That did nothing to stop his mood from spiraling downward. He hardly ever ate her meals with gusto, and he perfunctorily returned her embrace, putting his arms around her waist while looking away.

Instead of bringing warmth to Rachel, the touch felt like needles pricking her.

Rachel's mind drifted as she worked on her garden. She glanced at the budding plants.

The tiny green shoots held no appeal to her, nor was she excited by

the promise of beauty they held. She could barely focus; the only thing on her mind was how to fix everything.

A bead of sweat formed on her brow as she carefully cleared the sprouting weeds. Daniel had been right; weeds were quite tenacious. They grew in strategic places, hungry for the nutrients and water her plants needed to survive.

She didn't need to tend to the garden as much as she did, but it helped her think. And right now, she had a lot to think about.

What baffled Rachel was that Travis had improved their security measures, yet the thieves didn't relent.

Everybody was running on little sleep. Even she and Adeline stayed out during the day in case they came across something unusual. That way, they could alert the others.

Travis, Daniel, Bernard, and George took turns riding the perimeter of the ranch, both within the boundary and along the outside edge, every few hours.

When they saw any suspicious activity or an unknown wagon coming close by, they cocked their gun or raised it to show that they could use it.

Rachel was sure that they would hit their target, too. She and Adeline had watched the men practice until they could hit the bullseye.

She didn't doubt that the rustlers would be shot if they were seen.

Uncle Travis had even made sure one of the ranch hands was watching the field during mealtimes, so the place wouldn't be left bare and insecure. He'd bought explosives, bullets, and gunpowder so they would always be prepared for a fight.

Wiping sweat from her brow, she flicked it off. Straightening, she dropped her eyes to the animals grazing in the distance.

She could make out George and Bernard standing watchfully near the herd.

Since the thieving began, they never left the animals to graze alone. The horses were shut off in the stalls earlier than usual. The barn and cowshed were kept well-secured.

Still, the rustlers eluded them. Rachel's search for the thieves had yielded no result so far. After her chores every day, she surveyed the ranch, looking for any suspicious movement.

Yet, she'd never caught them.

Despite the precautions, the rustling continued. It seemed the men knew the topography of the land—every nook and cranny.

There was no other plausible explanation for the constant thievery. The rustlers had studied the ranch before making their first attack.

It couldn't be by mere chance that they'd been so successful. Eight sheep and twelve goats had been taken so far.

Since the goat incident, they'd stolen thrice. Although there were disturbances during the day, they only stole successfully at night.

Still, Rachel wondered why the rustlers weren't satisfied.

They kept coming back for more. She couldn't help but imagine them getting bolder or recruiting more men to help them steal more livestock.

Travis had even had the height of the wooden fence extended to more than eight feet and promised to buy barbed wire once the ranch made some more money.

Yet, the stealing continued. Surely, the rustlers weren't climbing that high. Or were they?

The circumstances were dire. They needed to find the thieves soon, or this would never end. The situation made Rachel angrier as the days passed by.

She boldly felt she could catch the thieves if she just investigated more.

And apprehending the thief, no matter how tough it may seem, would help her redeem herself in the eyes of her husband's uncle.

Everything seemed to have gone wrong. Just a few weeks ago, she'd been happy and hopeful about the future.

Now, her relationship with her husband was unsteady, the ranch was losing animals, and she could feel the distrust radiating from Travis whenever they happened to be in proximity.

Rachel continued working, her thoughts making her angrier and more worried.

Her gaze drifted up. The dark clouds signified it would rain soon enough. She hoped the rain would fall at night—she'd always enjoyed rainy nights.

Memories of the rainy nights she'd spent curled up beside her husband made her feel a pang of longing. She missed his touch, the sweet words he whispered to her.

She wanted to kiss him, to feel and taste him, but she didn't think that would happen tonight if it rained. She hoped their marriage would return to what it had been, and soon.

Sighing, Rachel returned to her task. She reached for the manure she'd gotten from the barn. Carefully, she started applying it to the soil.

The strong stench mixed with the smell of the wet soil she'd irrigated, and she grimaced.

When dusk fell, she started her investigation again. She toured the ranch, searching for signs that anything was amiss.

The fence was still in place. The animals had already been herded into their shelter.

She combed the surroundings, darting her gaze this way and that. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. After a while of waiting fruitlessly, she went to the farmhouse.

Supper was almost done when she arrived. Adeline was making soup.

The steam from the pot made the kitchen hotter than usual, and Rachel sat on a stool, soaking in the warmth and enjoying the aroma.

The housekeeper glanced up from the pot she was stirring over the cast iron stove. "Still trying to catch the thieves?"

Rachel sighed heavily. "I didn't see them. They seem to now operate only at night. When will this end? The rustlers have to be caught soon, or else..."

She couldn't even bear to say it. If the rustlers weren't apprehended, they would get bolder and cart away all the animals.

"The sheriff has started investigating the case. I'm sure the thieves will be found soon enough."

Rachel nodded, slightly comforted by the housekeeper's optimism.

So far, Adeline seemed to be the only one that still maintained her calm. She was like a source of comfort to Rachel's troubled mind.

George stood watch while they ate supper. After eating, Rachel volunteered to go and give him his food.

She hurried to the barn. She couldn't see the ranch hand standing guard anywhere.

As she dropped the food on a stool in front of the barn, she realized the barn door was open. She quickly entered, hoping to see the thieves and alert the other people on the ranch.

A horse whinnied softly. The clop of the horses' hooves when she entered sounded too loud.

When she walked up to the animal, she saw George was sleeping on a mat not far from the horse. A lamp, pistol, and a few explosives were beside him.

"George," she said.

He didn't answer.

She tapped him on the shoulder. He grunted, turned, and continued sleeping.

Rachel contemplated her next line of action. She could go back to the dining room where Daniel and Travis were discussing and tell them about George sleeping on duty.

That might make Travis fire the ranch hand. Besides, nobody on Hickman Ranch was resting enough these days. George could have been so weary that he'd needed to catch some sleep.

She decided against it. She would just sit and wait for a few hours until Bernard took over the shift.

If she got tired while waiting, she would wake him up. By that time, it would be easier for him to respond because his body would have gotten the much-needed rest.

She walked away from him and stood near a bale of alfalfa hay. Nothing happened for a long while until something furry moved over her feet.

Rachel bit back a scream as the mouse scurried off. She sucked in a

breath to calm herself. Her fear of rodents couldn't ruin things for her now.

Time ticked slowly by. Soon, raindrops started hitting the roof. Rachel stifled a groan.

She wasn't looking forward to running through the rain in the dark while trying to return to the cottage. The rustlers wouldn't attack on a night like this, would they?

Disappointed, she decided to return home. Daniel might still be at the farmhouse chatting with Travis, so he would assume she was in the cottage.

She was about to leave the barn when the sound of scuffling feet caught her attention. She stilled and turned to George. He was still sleeping.

A second later, she heard it again.

Someone was on the ranch.

For a second, Rachel debated what to do. She'd dreamed of the day she would catch the thief, but now that she was close, she was at a loss.

The rustler was undoubtedly a man. She was alone and powerless.

How could he find her intimidating? No, she couldn't just rush out and challenge him. She had to think of something. And quickly.

She combed the barn with her gaze. There was a rod and a lasso somewhere around here. She searched for them with her hands.

She couldn't yet use a lasso, so a rod would have to do.

When her hand closed around the wooden shaft, she breathed in relief. Now she had something to defend herself with if the rustler turned dangerous.

As an afterthought, she picked up the pistol beside the sleeping ranch hand. From watching the target practice, she knew she had to pull the trigger to shoot, but that was the extent of her knowledge.

She didn't know if it was loaded or cocked, but that didn't matter. She didn't intend to shoot; she would just use the gun to scare the thief, screaming as much as possible.

A sharp moo reached her ears, prompting her into action.

She ran out of the barn into the rain. Raindrops hit her skin like blunt needles, seeping through her clothes until she was drenched.

She tugged at her scarf in the hopes that a part of her face would be shielded from the onslaught of the pelting raindrops.

Heart beating wildly in her chest, she crept toward the cowshed. The moon was out.

A faint light shone on the field, reflecting shadows of trees, structures, and—Rachel's gaze fixed on the entrance to the cowshed—the outline of the slim brown-haired man trying to break in.

She approached the shed, the kerosene lamp and rod in her left hand and the pistol in her right hand. She hoped she'd get to him in time.

Her plan was simple. She would creep up behind him, stun him with a blow, and shout for help. The thief would be tied up and taken to jail, and her name would be cleared.

The door to the cowshed squeaked. Driven by urgency, she ran toward the thief in the dark, waving the rod as mud splattered on her legs and gown.

“Halt!”

The man turned to her, smirked, and continued trying to get into the shed.

Rachel paused. He hadn't even bothered to move. Now, what would she do?

She couldn't possibly turn back now. If she ran to alert Daniel or Travis, the thief would catch her before she'd taken a few steps.

If he wasn't afraid of the rod, then maybe he would respect the damage the gun could cause.

She raised the weapon, her hand shaking uncontrollably. Although she screamed out the next few words, her voice was quivering.

“Halt, or I’ll shoot.”

The thief didn’t turn around this time. He continued trying to damage the door; it had begun to give in.

More cows were mooing. The sound of hooves from disturbed animals had increased.

Rachel pointed the gun at the thief as best as she could, closed her eyes, scowled deeply, and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the bullet hitting wood was the loudest thing she’d ever heard.

She opened her eyes wide. There was a hole on the wooden wall of the shed just beside where the thief’s head had been.

The man had ducked. In a flash, he bolted.

Knowing she couldn’t catch him, she turned and ran to the barn. She led Daisy out, shaking her head at George, who was still sleeping despite all the commotion.

Mounting the horse and urging it forward, she rode in the direction the thief had gone. Rainwater poured down her face as she rode, stinging her eyes and disturbing her vision.

Still, she kept on.

She searched the surroundings and spotted the thief running ahead of her. Determined to catch him, Rachel urged the horse forward.

She didn’t have the confidence to ride faster since she wasn’t skilled enough.

The rain poured down in increasing intensity, drenching her to the bone. She blinked to clear the water from her eyes. She saw the man making his way to a hole in the wooden fence.

She urged Daisy to move faster. Her body flopped up and down as she tried to steady herself on the slippery saddle. She'd never ridden in the rain, but she had to catch this thief.

She raised the gun once more and shot at the fence.

The man bolted through the fence, shouting, "Go, go, go!"

As Rachel got to the hole in the fence, she saw a wagon driving off. The hole was the size of an average man. On the horse, she was taller than it.

She bent down and went through the hole, watching the thieves take off.

Her heart was beating wildly in her chest as she remembered Travis shooting into the air on the day the goat had been stolen. He'd later called it a warning shot.

Knowing that she couldn't kill the thieves who had driven away, she raised the gun and gave one final shot.

She was disappointed that she hadn't caught any of the men. Nevertheless, they hadn't taken any animals.

She turned to go back in. While passing the hole in the fence to get into the ranch, her dress got caught on several nails and she was stuck.

Her quivering hand removed the cloth from the nails, one part after the other.

Her body felt frozen; cold seeped in from every opening in her gown. The lamp fell from her hand. She was too tired to bend down and pick

it up.

She could already see some light coming out from the barn. Shivering, she made her way back toward it.

On getting there, she saw the men outside. They were all holding guns. Travis, Daniel, and Bernard had mounted horses. George was standing by the side.

Daniel's horse was blocking Travis, his back to her. But she could make out his words in the pelting rain.

From the volume of his voice and the sharpness of his tone, they were arguing again.

"Uncle Travis, we can handle this. Let George ride on the horse while you wait in your house. The more you argue about this, the more time we give the bandits to get away."

Travis's voice was low and annoyingly calm as usual. She could barely hear what he was saying.

"Who are you to tell me where to go and where not to go? You'd rather let the thieves get away by blocking my path?"

The back of Daniel's shoulders flexed. He put his head down. "I'd rather you stay alive. I don't want to lose you."

Just then, Travis and Bernard spotted her and their eyes widened. Daniel's head looked from one man to the other. He whirled around.

Rachel was ghastly tired. She didn't think she could move anymore.

She let Daisy trot into the barn, barely holding the reins. She tried her best to keep sitting upright on the saddle, but occasionally she found herself slipping off the horse.

As she rode into the barn, she heard her husband shouting at George.

“What did you say you were doing again? How come my wife is on that horse instead of you? You let my wife endanger her life, just like that.”

George opened his mouth and shut it again.

She stopped the horse to talk to Daniel. It was obvious that George had been sleeping; his eyes were still red. She would tell her husband just that.

But her brain was muddled and her whole body was shivering in shock. It took so much effort to open her mouth and talk that the gun fell from her hand and clattered to the floor.

“He was sleeping,” she said slowly.

Daniel and Bernard had already come down from the horse and were running toward her. To her eyes, they seemed incredibly slow.

Her body toppled off the horse and landed on Daniel’s arms.

She could feel her eyes shutting and sleep closing in. There was something important she needed to say. It had to do with the fence. She forced her eyes open.

“The fence,” she said. Even to her ears, her voice sounded weak.

“Rachel, it’s alright,” Daniel said softly.

In her mind, she shook her head vigorously. But her neck was stiff, so her head only moved to the side once.

“The fence... It’s...”

“You don’t have to tell me now. You can say it later.”

Travis, who had dismounted and come toward her, held Daniel on the shoulder. “What happened to the fence?”

“A hole,” she managed to say.

A flicker of anger and suspicion crossed his face but he quickly changed his expression. As her eyes finally shut and she slept off, she heard Travis say, “Well done, Rachel.”

It was the first time he’d called her by name.



A warm cloth was pressed to her neck then to her arm. Rachel heard Daniel muttering, “You’d better wake up, Rachel. Don’t catch the shivers. Oh, please, don’t catch the shivers.”

Hair strands fell on her arms. She opened her eyes to see Daniel’s head face down on her arm.

She was in the cottage, and the place was warm. She was lying down on the sofa, which had been repositioned as near to the fire as possible. A blanket was covering her.

She stared into the fire, paying no attention to the dancing embers. The thief’s escape meant many things; more animals might be stolen.

Although Travis had praised her effort, he didn’t look like he’d believed her. Now, he would have no reason to believe she was innocent, and her dear husband would constantly be frustrated about being unable to keep the animals safe. The implications were grave.

Although her body was warm, she still felt cold. Her chest tightened and she coughed.

Daniel raised his head, a broad smile on his face. He hugged her.

Rachel sighed, contentment filling her. It had been a long time since she saw her husband smile at her. He handed her a cup of tea.

She took it from him gratefully; happiness spread through her at his

kind gesture. Sipping it, she felt the warmth move from her throat to her chest.

He brushed her cheeks with his fingers. His eyes were filled with concern as he said, "Don't go off riding in the dark again. You could have been hurt."

"I just wanted to catch the thief. I hate seeing you so worried."

"I'll be even more worried if you get hurt," he said, stroking her chin.

"My brave little wife, riding off after a thief. Perhaps I'll tell the sheriff how brave you are. Maybe he can make you his deputy."

Rachel giggled.

His expression turned serious. "Don't do that again. I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

Tears gathered in her eyes. It had been so long since her husband had spoken to her with such tenderness in his voice. She nodded, too overcome with emotion to speak.

Afterward, he asked her to narrate what had happened that night and she obliged. By the time she'd told him all that had happened, she was tired and dozing off.

Daniel carried her into his room and placed her on the bed. He lay beside her and held her, so her head was on his chest. He stroked her hair fondly, his chest rumbling as he spoke.

Rachel wrapped her arms around him. She might not have achieved what she'd set out to do, but she'd been reconciled with her husband. That alone was enough to dull the frustration she'd felt at not being able to catch the thief.

As she curled up near her husband that night, her heart glowed with a welcome emotion.

Hope.

Daniel was awake long after Rachel finally slept.

His wife had almost gotten killed tonight. They'd heard three gunshots and he didn't want to imagine who had shot what.

If he'd known Rachel was out there, he wouldn't have argued with Travis for so long to stay back for the sake of his safety. He would have ridden off to his wife.

Luckily, she'd been all right. And she'd been brave, too.

By the look of dread on her face when she came back riding Daisy, he was sure she'd used the gun. Thankfully, her body had warmed up and she'd awoken.

He was supposed to stand watch that night after George, but Bernard had volunteered to take his place in the middle of the night.

That was all well and good. His wife had been doing their work and she needed him.

He stroked her back with his finger. She stirred and he held her until she slept off again.

He stayed in that position, his body warming hers, until his eyes closed and his body succumbed to slumber.

Once it was daybreak, he covered the still sleeping Rachel properly.

Then he went to check the fence hole and handle the case of George sleeping on duty.

Even though George shouldn't have fallen asleep, Daniel knew they'd been stretching themselves thin. He'd tried to hire another ranch hand after the first theft, but he wasn't sure who he could trust. The only set of people that had applied looked shady.

Since the rustlers had attempted to break into the cowshed, Daniel called Bernard and George and they went to examine the cows. They counted the animals, and they were all there.

However, the calves hadn't been branded yet.

The fact that the rustlers had set their eyes on the cows was both a relief and a cause to worry. The thieves' confidence had improved so much that they not only kept coming back, but they'd also become bold enough to attempt stealing a bull.

He couldn't let that happen. He didn't know how, but he was determined to find out.

Daniel sighed. He'd done everything he could, and still, it wasn't enough. There was only one thing left to do—buy more barbed wire to complete the fencing.

But that would cost a lot of money and the ranch didn't have enough. The theft rate was already making them run into losses.

Even if they apprehended the thieves, they still might not break even this year.

He'd spoken with his uncle about all this the previous day after supper. Travis had suggested selling off a few heads of cattle in the coming months.

Maybe he'd gone off to town early in the morning to find buyers and wouldn't be back till sundown. On the other hand, considering what

happened with Rachel last night, his uncle could still be around.

Nevertheless, Daniel wondered if they should sell off as many animals as they could. The more livestock the rustlers stole, the more their profits dwindled.

If they sold most of them now, they could still prevent a huge loss down the road.

At this rate, selling the livestock could be their only saving grace. It would help them purchase barbed wire and prevent the loss of more animals.

Though the thought held no appeal to him, it was the only other option. Until the thieves were caught, the animals weren't safe.

Besides, the chances of getting the stolen animals back appeared grimmer as the days passed. They could have been sold, butchered up to be sold as meat or sold to ranches in other towns.

They could be on another ranch in Fort Worth, sudden additions to someone else's livestock. How would he find them then? By inspecting every ranch in Fort Worth?

He paused. He needed to first crosscheck the fence security and examine the hole.

Rachel had described how she'd seen a man trying to break into the shed. She'd pursued him as he ran toward the fence.

"Did you check the fence last night?" he asked the ranch hands.

"Immediately after you left, I covered it up with the roofing sheet left after we built the cottage," Bernard replied.

"Let's survey the fence." He glanced around. "We'll start with the hole."

They set to work. Each man took a horse, mounted it, and rode to the scene of the incident.

Daniel kept a slow pace as he surveyed the ranch with a critical eye, looking for clues. Wide-open pastures stretched out around him, separated from the forest by rows of fences.

The horse's hooves struck the wet soil, sinking a bit deeper in some areas. It had rained for a long time last night.

For several feet, he didn't notice anything out of the ordinary except for shells from the bullet that had fallen on the ground and the footprints of a human and horse.

Daniel's mind was heavy. Although no animal had been stolen the previous night, he was still frustrated. He wondered when the rustlers would stop.

If he could find a way of catching them, then they would surely not be able to come back.

He sighed heavily. Far from the barns, he sensed no trace of the smell of hide and dung he was so used to. The air smelled like rain; crisp and fresh, with a hint of wet soil and plants.

Wildflowers dotted the landscape, their petals open in full bloom. The skies were clear and blue, contrasting naturally with the distinct green of trees and shrubs.

The brightness of the morning seemed to mock him. Here he was, sullen and frustrated, unable to enjoy the mornings he'd always loved.

He rode at a slow pace, keeping his eyes peeled out for any discrepancies. The barbed wire fence stood tall and proud, a result of expended efforts and resources.

His uncle had spared no cost in ensuring maximum security of the ranch. Now, it seemed their efforts had been in vain.

As they rode closer to the fence, Daniel's thoughts turned to Rachel and a deep-seated worry rested in his stomach.

He'd been alarmed when she'd fallen off the horse, shivering, and didn't wake up for several hours afterward. Despite his concern for her safety, he couldn't help feeling a bit of pride.

She was bolder than he'd given her credit for. His darling wife hadn't waited for help; she'd gone after the thief herself.

Having a conversation with her as they sat near the fireplace had eased his worry significantly. He'd realized there was no use holding a grudge or holding on to his doubts.

She hadn't given him any reason not to trust him. He didn't agree with his uncle's claims about her involvement with the rustlers.

If Rachel had indeed set out to steal from the ranch, she wouldn't have taken it upon herself to ensure the ranch's safety by trying to catch the thief.

Over the last few days, he'd also started to secretly agree with her that she hadn't come out West just to reconnect with her father. She'd worked hard to learn the ways of the ranch and tried to help out as much as possible.

She was still trying her best by endangering her life just to catch the thieves who were stealing from Hickman Ranch. If her father was her only concern, she wouldn't have ridden after the criminal in the dark.

Not just that, her concern for him was real.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized how much he needed to learn to trust her. He'd told himself he would trust his wife until proven otherwise.

Since she hadn't proved herself unworthy of his trust, he couldn't keep doubting her.

Bernard dismounted and removed the roofing sheet from the hole. It looked like the thieves had sawed the wood so that they could enter.

With the heavy rain last night, nobody would have heard the noise from the saws.

A sharp chirp caught Daniel's attention. His gaze followed the course of a tiny green bird as it flew from tree to tree, finally landing on a giant oak tree just beyond the fence.

A pale blue scarf lay on the ground a few feet from the fence, appearing torn in some places. He got down from the horse, passed through the hole, and went to pick it up.

It belonged to his wife.

Daniel's heart sank. What was Rachel's scarf doing here? She wore it often, so he was sure it was hers.

If this scarf was here and it was his wife's, then she hadn't told him the full truth. She must have at least gotten to the fence or passed through this hole for the scarf to be here.

Bernard had covered the hole shortly after she came. Although the rain was heavy last night, it wasn't windy. The wind didn't blow this scarf this far.

The deep-rooted doubt in his heart was rising again. He walked across the prairie and saw the shell of a bullet. When he picked it, he saw it was for the pistol.

Daniel decided to investigate first.

"Bring the gun that Rachel held last night," he told Bernard as he walked back toward the barn.

He found the two other shells in the field. When the ranch hand came back, he checked the gun and noted that three bullets were missing.

Somehow, things didn't add up. Rachel, who didn't know how to shoot, had suddenly shot the only three bullets they'd heard the night before, and one of them was outside the fence where she didn't need to go after the thieves had left. It was implausible.

Daniel wondered if he really knew his wife. He'd thought she didn't know her father's whereabouts only to find out that she was corresponding with him frequently.

He'd thought she was a city girl who had never touched a gun in her life. Now, she'd shot three bullets in one night.

There was something his wife wasn't telling him, and he needed to confront her about it.

The soft pattering of hooves made him look up. Travis approached on a horse, riding toward him at a fast pace.

Realizing what would happen if his uncle found Rachel's scarf, he hid it in his pocket. His uncle would come to a worse conclusion than Daniel had.

He couldn't let that happen. Not until he'd confirmed how her scarf had gotten there and how she'd learned to shoot.

Perhaps her claim of finding the thief was nothing more than a cover-up for her true motives.

He wasn't sure what to feel. A part of him wanted to trust her; the other part was highly skeptical. There were too many coincidences.

The rustling had begun after her arrival, she'd kept her pa's presence in Fort Worth a secret, and the thieves had found out about the wooden fence after years of it being hidden.

Presently, the blue scarf and her knowledge of shooting were additions he couldn't comprehend. He didn't quite know what to make of it.

Travis stopped the horse near his and dismounted. “This wooden fence has been this way for years. I still wonder how the rustlers got to know about it.”

The older man looked around. The ranch hands were far off. “I believe someone in this ranch is collaborating with those thieves, and I want us to start an investigation.”

Daniel said nothing. His mind drifted to the scarf in his pocket, his annoyance sharpening as suspicions clouded his mind.

No, he wouldn’t assume. Not yet. He’d investigate the matter thoroughly before jumping to a conclusion.

Then, he would know for sure who he’d been living with: his wife or a pretentious woman who had planned her way into Hickman ranch.

Rachel's smile faltered when she saw the stormy look on Daniel's face as he marched towards the cottage. Behind him, the sun was setting.

The sun sank deeper into the horizon, its bright golden rays dimmed to a dull orange. She'd been watching the sunset, admiring the myriad colors from a chair on the porch.

She stepped down from the porch and approached him.

"What's happened? Did you find something?"

She searched his gaze, trying to decipher what had gone wrong. He hadn't caught the thief, she knew that much. She'd heard about the two animals that had just gotten stolen.

Her husband didn't have the usual mix of frustration and worry on his face; he appeared angry. His eyes were hard, filled with distrust.

Her brows furrowed as she tried to discern the reason behind his foul mood. Perhaps he'd gotten into another argument with his uncle.

Her stomach dropped. She hoped that wasn't the case.

She stopped when she was about a foot away from him. He smelled like leather and pine trees. She reached a hand out to wipe the beads of sweat on his forehead.

He grabbed her hand, startling her.

"Are you alright?" Rachel eyed him warily. Was he angry at her?

"I found this."

He raised a hand up. He was holding a pale blue scarf.

Her eyes widened. Her scarf! She'd completely forgotten about it. She'd worn it yesterday. This morning, she'd searched for the scarf but hadn't found it.

Thinking she'd misplaced it, she'd worn her gray scarf instead. It had most likely fallen off when she was trying to catch the thief.

She reached for it. He withdrew his hand.

"Daniel, what are you doing? You want to start wearing scarves now?" She laughed.

Daniel's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. He didn't crack a smile. Her laughter faded.

Cattle lowed in the distance. She didn't need to look to know the ranch hands were heralding the cattle into the shed. She searched Daniel's gaze, wondering what was wrong.

"I found this near the fence. The weak part of the fence."

She took a step back, flummoxed. He said the word 'weak' like he was implying something.

She hadn't known any part of the fence was weak. Even if she had, what did that have to do with her scarf? Whatever it was, it was clearly making him upset.

She frowned slightly. How had her scarf gotten there? In a flash, she remembered.

She'd worn the scarf throughout yesterday, but she'd been so occupied with her disappointment at not catching the thief that she'd failed to notice its absence.

What she didn't understand was why her husband was glaring at her with so much anger. "Why are you so upset? Have I done something wrong?"

"More animals were stolen this morning. Another coincidence?"

Then, it dawned on her.

"You—you think I have something to do with the thievery."

He clenched his jaw. His silence confirmed it. Her heart broke. It was bad enough that Travis thought she was helping the rustlers. Now, her husband thought the same.

She stared at him with hurt disbelief. "I can't believe you would..." She shook her head, laughing bitterly. "You don't trust me. You're my husband, yet you don't trust me."

"You haven't given me a reason to." Daniel's voice was hard, cold.

Rachel sucked in a breath in an attempt to calm her rising temper. She'd had enough of people assuming the worst about her. What else did she have to do to win their trust?

If her husband didn't trust her, how would their marriage ever flourish?

"I've done all I can to be a good wife." Her voice shook slightly, but she kept on.

"I've learned everything I can, done everything I was told to do to prove to you and everyone here that I'm not a burden. Still, you don't trust me."

He didn't look the least bit affected by her outburst. "Why was your scarf at the fence?"

"It fell off while I was trying to catch the thief! I told you about it, didn't I? Or do you think I made that story up?"

Daniel said nothing.

She scoffed. "You'd rather believe it got lost when I was trying to help the thief into the ranch, wouldn't you?"

He remained silent.

Stepping past him, she walked away. Angry tears stung her eyes. It was like fighting a losing battle.

Her attempts at learning the ropes of ranch work had seemed to impress everyone until she'd forgotten to lock the paddock and the animals had been stolen.

Travis didn't trust her. The only thing that had given her hope was her husband's faith in her.

And now, she didn't have that.

Rachel blinked back the tears. Turning westward, she walked across the open grassland into the thickets. Wild berries dotted the bushes: blackberries, raspberries and gooseberries.

She glanced at them, and her vision blurred.

An ache spread through her chest. She'd left all she'd known to build a home with her husband. Instead, she'd been misunderstood, ignored, and hurt.

In the haze of anger, she'd forgotten to use the dirt path to the stream.

Knee-high grasses grazed the skirt of her dress. She strode through the

bushes, the sound of the burbling stream getting louder as she approached.

Rachel sat on a tree stump, staring as the water flowed steadily eastward. A line of ants crept in an orderly fashion several inches from her feet.

She watched them for a while, until they disappeared into the bushes and her thoughts returned to her husband.

After their first argument, she'd hoped that they'd reconcile. Just when things had started returning to normal, Daniel had revealed his obvious mistrust of her.

How could he have been so quick to assume the worst about her? They'd been married for months, yet he'd jumped to a hasty conclusion about her character.

If she hadn't told him about the chasing the thief, she could have justified his suspicions. But since she'd told him, he had no reason to assume she'd helped the rustler.

Why would she, anyway? What did she stand to gain by stealing from her husband's ranch? It didn't make sense to her, yet Daniel had been so quick to believe this.

She picked up a stone and tossed it into the stream. The pebble hit the water with a splash, forming waves that faded away after seconds.

Picking another pebble, she tossed it again. Oddly, the motion calmed her.

The rustling of the bushes made her ears perk up.

"Rachel?"

Daniel's deep voice disrupted her calm. She kept mute, willing him to go away. What had he come to accuse her of now?

She felt his presence behind her, but she didn't turn.

"I'm sorry."

His voice was soft, low. She stopped throwing pebbles.

"I shouldn't have accused you the way I did."

He squatted next to her. Rachel turned to face him. He looked apologetic.

"You've worked hard every day, and you've never complained. You've done all you can to transform our cottage into a home.

"And this shirt," he touched the powder blue shirt she'd made for him a few weeks ago, "you didn't have to, but you made it for me. I don't think I've been appreciating you enough."

His eyes held hers. "Thank you for all you've been doing for me. Including chasing after the thief."

She cracked a smile, feeling herself soften toward him. His apology was heartfelt. Her anger melted.

She couldn't stay mad at him, not when he looked at her with such remorse. Perhaps he'd lashed out at her because he was upset about the stolen animals.

Whatever the reason, she had to forgive him so things could go back to normal.

"You're forgiven."

Daniel held her hand. He drew imaginary circles on her palm, and she snatched her hand, giggling.

Standing, he held a hand out to her. "Shall we go, milady?"

Rachel placed her hand in his. He helped her up and led her through the bushes onto a worn path.

"I ought to pick some berries to make pie," she said as they walked.

"It's getting dark. Adeline will have to forgo her berries tonight."



Dear Father,

I can't leave my husband.

I intend to stay married to him till death do us part, as I vowed on our wedding day. I'm afraid I'll have to turn down your request.

Kindly tell the gentleman not to hope, as I intend to stay on Hickman ranch until my husband says otherwise.

Rachel stifled a yawn. She was tired. Daniel had gone to bed a few minutes ago. She'd decided to stay up to write her pa a letter, but now she wasn't sure she could complete it.

She had to make it clear to her father that she had no intention of leaving Daniel, let alone of marrying another man. They'd had a few fights, but that was no reason to leave.

Married couples had conflicts sometimes. Even her ma and pa, and they'd loved each other fiercely.

Now that she was back on good terms with her husband, the only challenge was finding the thief and resolving Travis's distrust. She hoped that would happen soon enough.

Once the rustler was caught, the last hindrance would be removed.

Her eyelids drooped. She dozed for a while, then jerked awake when she almost fell off the chair.

Staring at the half-written letter, she realized she'd smudged some ink on the paper. Too tired to continue, she stood and went into the room.

She needed sleep. The letter could wait.

At first crow the next morning, Travis was on his way to Daniel's cottage.

He'd barely slept the night before. Instead, he'd tossed and turned on the bed, thinking of how to stop the robbery and get the animals back.

Nothing he came up with seemed feasible. He couldn't march onto every ranch in Fort Worth and demand to examine their animals, nor could he continue waiting around until the rustlers sold off his livestock.

The sky was starting to lighten. On an impulse, he decided to head toward the paddock to check on the animals. He walked briskly, hoping no more damage had been done.

He heard some movement. Straining his ear, he waited. Nothing appeared amiss. He counted the animals. Relief flooded through him as he realized none had been stolen.

A cock crowed again, louder this time.

He was still surprised he hadn't thought of the wooden fence. The rustlers had known about it, and they'd used that weakness to stage their attack.

For years, he'd assumed the wooden fence was invisible. His assumption had been very wrong, and very deadly.

He vowed to finally get the fence fixed as soon as he could. It wouldn't be easy—the ranch would hardly make any profits this year—but he'd find a way around it.

The words he'd said to his nephew months ago came to mind: *The strength of a flock lies in its weakest member.*

He heaved a weary sigh. The meaning hadn't applied to a flock alone. If only he'd realized that sooner, the rustlers would have a lesser chance of attacking the ranch.

Travis was sick and tired of the whole ordeal. He had to come up with a plan to catch the thieves and recover their losses. And he had to do it fast.

As he passed his house, he heard the shuffle of footsteps. Adeline had woken up.

He'd tried to keep his steps light, but she was a light sleeper. She'd decided to prepare an early breakfast.

The sun had just started cresting the horizon when he reached the cottage. Two reclining chairs stood side by side on the porch, several feet away from the door.

To be polite, he knocked on the door. There was no response. After waiting a while, he stepped into the house.

The parlor was empty. Daniel was undoubtedly asleep.

Travis didn't like the fact that his nephew hadn't heard him knock. With everything that had been happening, Daniel should have been more alert.

He shook his head, unamused by his nephew's lack of vigilance.

His gaze swept the room. He hadn't been to the cottage since Rachel's arrival, so the cottage looked unfamiliar at first.

Four chairs surrounded a table, a vase of colorful flowers in the middle. The brightly-patterned curtains caught his eye and he frowned in distaste.

It was a bit too colorful for his liking—like a rainbow had thrown up all over the room. It looked like a childish attempt at homemaking.

A pile of letters was folded neatly on the table. Daniel hadn't mentioned corresponding with anyone; he'd have told him if he had. The letters must be Rachel's.

He stared at the letters, suspicions rising. Who was she communicating with?

From what his nephew had told him, she had no family. If she was as alone as she'd claimed, she wouldn't have a pile of letters from whomever she'd been corresponding with.

Curious, he picked up a letter.

Dear Daughter,

Travis frowned. Daughter? Hadn't Rachel told Daniel her ma was dead and she hadn't seen her father for several years? Was that another lie?

The letter was from her father. He couldn't fathom why she'd keep her father hidden. Unless, of course, she wasn't who she claimed to be. Just as he'd suspected.

Setting his thoughts aside, he continued reading the letter.

I can't tell you how wonderful it is to receive news of your presence here in Fort Worth. I'd almost given up on ever finding you again. Perhaps, someday, we can meet again.

I'm glad to hear you've arrived safely to Hickman Ranch. I haven't been on a ranch before, so I'm not sure how big they are supposed to be.

I'd love to hear more about your surroundings. There's a lot to be seen, I'm sure.

What types of structures are on the ranch—a shed for the cattle, a paddock for the sheep and goats, a barn, a chicken coop? There's a farmhouse too, I imagine—do you live there?

And are there animals on the ranch? I assume there must be, please tell me all about it.

As well, daughter, please assure me that you are safe there. What kind of fencing protects this ranch? Is it sufficient to keep out any rustlers or other predators?

I look forward to reading all about your new life, and the place where you are currently living...

Travis's lips curled. He glared at the letter, his pulse speeding with each passing second.

Rachel had been divulging delicate security details to a stranger. She had no right to do such a thing!

In the margins of the letter, she'd freely written down details of the ranch to share with her father. This was a confirmation of his suspicions.

She wouldn't have divulged important details about the ranch unless she'd been up to something. He'd known she was involved with the rustling.

His years of toiling, the efforts and resources he'd invested into the ranch, she'd rendered it all in vain. Because of her, they'd lost any chances of making a profit this year.

He placed the letter on the table. Picking up another letter, he scanned through it. This one seemed to have been written by Rachel, herself.

...my husband's uncle doesn't want me here. He's made it clear that my presence isn't acceptable. I know it has to do with my ignorance about living on a ranch.

I'm trying hard, Father. I am. But it doesn't come easy for me. I'm not used to this kind of hard work, so my husband thinks I'm lazy.

The other day, I tried to cook. It was a mess. Daniel's uncle was upset, and there was an argument...

The letter stopped abruptly, the middle of the paper smudged with ink. He assumed she'd rewritten the letter and mailed the unmarred version to her father.

Travis scanned through several more letters.

Do not tarry in the Hickman ranch any longer. I have a suitor for you.

He's a gentleman who'll love, cherish and appreciate you. He has a ranch too, so your acquired skills in handling chores will be of good use.

Travis had known Rachel was flitty, not the kind of woman that would choose to live on a ranch. And definitely not the kind of woman that was suited to his nephew.

He was surprised she'd stayed this long. Now, he knew she had something up her sleeve.

Not only had she planned to leave the ranch, but she also wanted to marry another man.

Another ranch owner.

It didn't make much sense to him. Being a city girl, she should have decided to return to New York.

He'd been counting the days till she packed up and left, but he hadn't expected her to want to move to another ranch.

She could have chosen to return to the city since she wasn't suited to life on a ranch. Instead, she was set to marry another rancher.

Why would she leave one rancher for another, unless she had ulterior motives for marrying Daniel in the first place?

His nephew had thought he was being cruel for not accepting her. Turned out he'd been right. She had no intentions of settling down. Not with Daniel, and not on Hickman Ranch.

He had half a mind to tell his nephew what he'd discovered, but he decided against it.

Daniel thought himself in love with Rachel. He'd never see reason where she was concerned. But that would soon change.

Retrieving two of the letters, he placed them in his pocket. They'd come in handy soon when he could prove to everyone that she was indeed behind the thievery.

Finding out her true intentions would break his nephew's heart, but the sooner Daniel saw her for who she really was, the better.

He couldn't let her continue wreaking havoc on the ranch.

A peal of breezy laughter made him step away from the table. They were awake. He didn't want her seeing him going through her letters.

He sat on the chair, noticing how much brighter the room was. Light seeped into the parlor. On another day, he would have enjoyed the view. But not today.

A door opened. Surprise flitted across Daniel's face when he saw Travis.

"Uncle, what are you doing here so early?"

Rachel came to stand beside him. "Shall I make you a cup of coffee?"

Ignoring her, he said, "We need to talk. This thievery has gone on for far too long."

Daniel lowered himself to a chair.

Rachel sat beside him, looking all innocent and interested in the matter. He didn't want her there, but he raised no objections. Daniel wouldn't listen, anyway.

"Since we now know the rustlers' entry point, I suggest we stand guard at that specific place. That way, we can catch them by surprise."

He darted a glance at Rachel, noticing how rapt her attention was.

Now that he had proof, he just had to find a way to show others what she'd been doing all along.

This time, he wouldn't have to force her to leave. Daniel would kick her out himself.

The thieving had stopped.

It had been almost two weeks since the last two animals were stolen from the ranch. When three days passed and the number remained the same, it seemed everyone was holding their breath, as if unable to believe that the rustling had stopped.

At first, Rachel thought the rustlers wanted to switch up the pattern to catch them off-guard. But now, it seemed the thieves had tired of their looting.

For the first time since the rustling started, the livestock was safe.

Rachel woke up every morning hoping no further loss had occurred and dreading that it had. Every day for thirteen days, her prayer was answered.

The tension had thinned, giving way to uniform relief. Daniel didn't seem constantly tense—although she could sense he was worried about the well-being of the ranch.

It was then she realized how much the rustling had cost. The ranch hands were finally able to focus on other tasks, instead of keeping guard for most of the day.

She'd ensured she was always on the watch in case the thief attacked again, but he hadn't. The animals were safe.

She hoped the thievery had ended. Even if it had, the damage had been done. The ranch hadn't just lost animals, they'd lost significant income.

Because of the rustling, it'd be a long while before the ranch could make a profit again. Since the livestock was the ranch's source of livelihood, they had suffered a huge blow.

Rachel's gaze stayed fixated on the grazing herd.

Despite the hiatus, she still kept an eye out in case the thief showed up again. Although she'd seen just one thief that night, she wasn't sure whether or not there was more than one.

A sudden movement caught her eye. She squinted. A man stood in the distance, approaching the grazing herd. He looked nothing like George or Bernard.

She debated confronting him but thought better of it. She hadn't had much success the last time she tried. When he made a move to grab a sheep, she decided.

She ran toward the farmhouse, calling Daniel's name.

"Someone's trying to steal a sheep," she said breathlessly, then sped toward the field.

Daniel sprinted after her, Travis in tow.

As she neared the herd, her arrival alerted the thief. He froze for a second.

Peering at her, he said, "Rachel..."

Before she could say a word, he started running away.

"Your father extends his greetings," he called.

Daniel and Travis came to stand beside her, and her husband whirled to face her. "What?"

Rachel stared at him, stupefied. How had the thief known her name? She racked her mind for answers and yet she found none.

There was no explanation for how he could have known who she was.

Panic rose within her, making her blood run cold.

Her heart hammered in her chest as she dropped her mouth open in an attempt to find something to say. She had to tell her husband that this wasn't her fault.

Tears began to blur her vision. Rachel was frustrated with herself for not understanding what was happening and for the fear that grew within her now.

She stumbled back a few steps toward the path to the main house. Maybe if she had some time to herself, she could sort out this trouble.

But they gave her no time.

"You!"

Travis stomped forward so quickly and heavily, his hands balled into fists, that she had little time to react. Her knees grew weak. The tall man towered over her angrily.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Daniel take a small step forward. Her husband, the man who had said he would have her and hold her forever, appeared troubled.

He looked upset. He looked confused. But he did nothing to help her.

"Did you get them?"

Adeline had come down from the house, most likely having heard the

commotion.

It didn't matter what Rachel did now. She realized this with a lump in her throat. She gulped, wincing at the pain.

"You will leave immediately," Travis announced loudly. He shouted with spittle landing on her face and clothes. "I knew you never belonged here.

"You don't deserve any of this. You are a liar! A thief! Pack your bags and get out of here at once before I drag you haplessly to the sheriff!"

Devastation poured through her soul like an old winter storm.

It reminded Rachel of the terribly icy weather she had escaped from in New York. She had been so grateful to escape that place for so many reasons.

But she would accept a thousand New York winters to be free of this very moment.

"Please," she said with her voice wavering. "Please, don't do this to me. I don't have anywhere else to go. I'm married to Daniel, aren't I?"

"I don't know why... I don't know who that was. All I want to do is help!"

Her husband took another step forward. Reaching out to his uncle, Daniel started to offer up a suggestion. "Maybe it was a lie or a trick or something like that?"

To Rachel's surprise, the older man shoved a hand into his pocket and pulled out a paper that he pushed into Daniel's chest.

"Read that," he snarled. "Her father, a man she said was out of the picture, told her to get away from us.

"She's been planning to leave since she got here. You can't listen to a

word she says. I told you she wouldn't be any good."

How had he gotten that letter? Rachel wanted to throw up at the thought of these men reading her mail like that. They didn't understand.

The blood drained from her face while she watched Daniel look over the letter. It was all too easy to see the confusion fade into bewilderment and pain.

A tear made its way down her cheek. She hastily tried to explain "No, that's not right. You must believe me. I had no intention in leaving, truly. I was even writing him a letter.

"I didn't finish it, but I was writing one and I said that I wouldn't leave. I would never leave, I don't want to. Daniel, I want to be here with you."

She silently begged him to say something. She needed to hear his voice.

Instead, Daniel slowly folded the letter back up. His jaw tightened and then, without looking at her, he walked away.

Every time Rachel thought she couldn't feel any more alone, she was proven wrong. She stood there with her arms limp by her side.

In New York, her father had left out of desperation to right wrongs, and her mother had left in a death they hadn't wanted her to take. That had all been so painful.

But here, in Texas, Daniel was deliberately wanting to leave her.

She still scrambled for some explanation as to why that rustler had said her name.

The man had also mentioned her father. Did they know each other, these two men? Could her father have joined in with the thieves?

No, that wasn't the man she remembered. He wouldn't do that to her.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She slowly turned away. A cold breeze swept by her and so she covered her arms for warmth.

First, her parents, and now Daniel. The prospect of losing another family hurt unbearably hard.

They had made their allegations and it didn't seem like she could do anything to refute them.

Her thoughts spun out of control. Strangely enough, she thought of her friend Charlotte back east.

The woman's last letter had been bubbly and bright because of her engagement to Eric. Everything was going right for that couple.

Why couldn't anything go right for her, Rachel pondered miserably.

Daniel had thought that the hardest of his days were over.

How was it that he could be so wrong?

His heart beat so slowly that he wasn't sure it was really even working anymore. The letter in his hand burned his skin.

Nothing felt right in the world. His mind spun as he walked, not certain about where he was even going.

The words of his uncle rang in his mind and his eyes burned from reading the letter. He had thought Rachel talking to her father was an innocent activity.

But it shouldn't have been this. This last letter, combined with the letter noting all the aspects of their ranch, were too much to ignore.

Remembering how he had been concerned that Rachel had really come down here to see her father again, Daniel worried he had been right all along. The woman had made a fool out of him.

This brought everything about his wife into question.

He wondered how much had been a lie with her. Had she even lost contact with her father in all these years?

There was no way for him to know with certainty that she had even come from the east.

Maybe she had been planning this all along.

Swallowing hard, Daniel told himself there was no time to throw up. He hardly even had the time to be worrying like this.

The ranch required a lot of work. Everything only grew more complicated every time they lost an animal.

But even if he did need to work, Daniel couldn't picture himself being able to get anything done with the state of mind he was in at the moment.

The letter in his hand could not be forgotten.

Why had her father bothered to suggest that she leave and marry someone else? Who was it? Did they know she was already married?

Had she asked her father to find her someone better?

Beneath his anger was heartache.

Daniel tried his best to ignore that because he was so tired of all the burdens he had been carrying since Rachel had arrived. He had taken a shot in the dark with the idea of marrying someone he had never met.

They had never had any time to learn to trust each other.

There was no way he could trust her now. After this, he couldn't trust her or love her or do anything else with Rachel.

A couple told each other everything; Daniel had learned that from his parents while they were still alive. To build a life together, they had to understand one another.

So why wouldn't Rachel have told him about that letter?

The only answer could be that she had been wanting to hide this from

him.

Even if she hadn't helped with the thievery, she was planning to leave him high and dry. That was enough to break his heart into pieces.

He had heard her gulp and he had seen her eyes when his uncle called out her secrets: she hadn't wanted him to know. She must have been considering the suitor.

She had already tried to leave once. Perhaps he should have let her.

Stopping in his tracks, Daniel suddenly couldn't keep walking away from Rachel. His mind told him to keep moving. But his heart...

It was broken. It ached. And yet it still called for her.

He warred with himself for several minutes before grudgingly turning around. While his uncle talked to the ranch hands, Rachel was disappearing into their nearby cottage.

He didn't have to guess at what she would be doing now.

Though he couldn't bring himself to stop her, Daniel knew he could at least spend a few more minutes with his wife before she left for good. He could say a proper goodbye and it would give him the time he needed to memorize her beautiful face.

The love he bore for her was still there, even after what he had learned.

Sighing, Daniel started toward the little home he had built just of the two of them with the hope of a family someday. He suddenly hated it all.

Why couldn't Rachel be who he had believed her to be this morning? He hated her connection to the theft and he hated that she was leaving.

But he couldn't do anything about it.

He trudged into the house to watch her pack. She glanced at him and frowned before turning away from him to focus on the task at hand.

His eyes followed her movements to make sure she couldn't steal anything else.

Passing by, she grabbed the family Bible she had brought with her and went to store it in her bag. A piece of paper fell from the book.

Or rather, Daniel realized upon picking it up, it was a letter.

He saw it was unopened. Out of sheer curiosity, he opened it up. Not caring if Rachel caught him in the moment, he concentrated on reading the letter.

The script was unfamiliar but he quickly caught sight of some key words that stole his attention.

Color spread through his cheeks as he read, growing embarrassed and ashamed before finally being angry with himself.

Dearest Niece,

I wish my letters had found you sooner and I pray this one reaches you now. From our correspondence, it doesn't appear that you have received any of my other letters.

My friend has kindly sent this off for me under her name. Perhaps this will assist with the mailing problem.

I have received your letters and pray you will receive this one. Can you please let me know if you do?

It hurts me to say this, but your father is dead. He died some time ago...

“R_{achel}.”

She sniffed, shaking her hand. It was bad enough that Daniel had come into their room to watch her pack.

Remembering the loving gaze he had once given her and knowing she would never see it again hurt too much. Thus, she didn't want him looking at her now.

And she certainly wasn't up for conversation.

Busying herself around the room, Rachel attempted to work quickly and efficiently. It didn't seem effective, as she felt like she was moving against the current of a river.

All of this felt so wrong to her.

She had thought this would be her home. She had to come to love this ranch and this cottage dearly. Knowing she could never come back here stung terribly.

What would she do once she left?

“Rachel.” He spoke hoarsely, but something more in his tone caught her attention this time.

Glancing over at her husband, Rachel wondered what he was planning to say. She wouldn't be able to bear it if he said anything else rude or

hurtful.

Already, she was falling apart. Any minute now and she might crumble.

There was something in his hands.

She rubbed her eyes to get the tears out of the way. Then she blinked and took a step forward, frowning when she realized he held a letter. But what was it?

“What, Daniel?” she asked.

But he didn’t answer her.

Something in his eyes made her start to worry. He wasn’t angry or sad right then. But what?

Rachel furrowed her brow as she started over to his side. Upon reaching him, she didn’t recognize the handwriting from the letter.

Still, he held it out to her.

Her sadness gave way momentarily to puzzlement. Biting her lip, Rachel hesitantly took up the letter to see what had shocked him so.

First, she glanced at the signature.

Rachel gasped lightly upon realizing that this came from her aunt. She had been waiting so long in the hopes of hearing from the woman; she had even begun to worry that the woman had since passed away.

Yet the shock wasn’t over for her.

Shaking her head to concentrate, Rachel turned her attention to the actual content of the letter. She was hopeful of finding an uplifting message of familial hope and charity.

Anything would sound lovely if it wasn't anything like the last words that Travis had said to her.

But she was wrong. Reading this letter left her in such a daze that she had to walk on shaky legs over to the bed and sit on the edge.

Her hands trembled as she read it a second time and then a third because she worried she was imagining this.

She really wished that was all this was, just her wild imagination.

It hurts me to say this, but your father is dead. He died some time ago.

He came out to Texas to work in the mines. That is hard work and few make a good living out of it.

But he was determined to make it work so that he could better take care of you and your mother. I remember his high hopes.

Unfortunately, the mine failed. He sold his gold watch and came to me out of desperation. I didn't have much but I wanted to help.

But he soon grew ill. The mines are filled with fumes and other harsh things that have killed too many men.

Everyone knows the stories out here. Either you die quickly in the mines or slowly outside of them.

I tended to him for a long and painful week. Your father spoke of you and your mother constantly. And then, on a sunny Monday, your father passed on into the next life.

Rachel had memorized the words before she felt she truly understood what they said. She could hardly believe this. No, she couldn't believe it at all.

Footsteps trailed over to stand before her.

“Rachel?”

What could she say? She didn't know what to even think at this point. Biting her lip, she blinked several times over and worried about what all of this meant, if it were true.

Because if her father was dead, then he couldn't haven't written those letters.

Which begged the question of who had.

A shudder rippled through her and she accidentally bit her lip. It hurt, but it did wonders in pulling her out of her daze.

Gasping, she turned her face up to see Daniel standing before her. His earlier expression of hurt and anger had since disappeared, though she didn't know when.

Perhaps it was when he had read this letter and realized what it meant before she did.

Rachel opened her mouth and then closed it when she couldn't find the right words. She doubted there were any right words for a situation such as this one.

“My father...” She started to speak at last but didn't know how to go on. Fumbling with the paper, she tried to pull herself together. “He's... well, he's gone.”

“Yes,” Daniel agreed sympathetically.

He reached out a hand to her but then seemed to change his mind. Shifting his feet for a moment, he stared down at the ground before he lifted up his gaze to look at her once again.

She had to do something. Say something, at least.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Rachel folded the letter up and

then stood before him. He didn't move back.

That meant they were very close to each other, so close she could feel his hot breath against her cheek. But far enough apart that he didn't actually touch her.

It made her wish that he would. It felt like an eternity had passed since they had last been close together or touching. Daniel was always so gentle with her.

Just the thought of him never touching her again brought stinging tears to her eyes. She had lost her parents, truly this time, and now she was going to lose him.

"He's gone," Rachel said.

"Yes. I'm sorry," he added after a pause.

Though she supposed he might say something more, he didn't. She listened to the hammering of her heart for a minute before straightening up her shoulders while giving herself a pep talk.

She had to be able to do this.

She had wasted enough time standing around or sitting around uselessly. This was her chance to do something.

She had made a mistake, but maybe she could also fix the entire situation.

"My father is dead. He hasn't been writing me letters like I supposed. They sounded rougher than the way he spoke, from what I recall," she said slowly.

Maybe if she kept talking, she could make sense of this.

"There were a few things I noticed but ignored. I was just so excited to hear from him. From whoever was doing this.

“But I don’t know how. I don’t understand how any of this happened. If only I had been more careful...”

His hand rose to rest on her shoulder. “You didn’t know.”

Her hair fluttered around her shoulders as she shook her head. Though she usually loved her husband’s touch, she didn’t deserve it now.

Thoughts spun in her mind over what must have happened.

Someone else had found her letter. They must have read it and either decided to come thieving around this ranch on their own or handed the missive over to someone who wanted to do such a thing.

This would have assuredly explained why that thief had mentioned her name and her father. The thought made her ill.

“At least my father didn’t join a band of thieves like I feared,” she mumbled. There was little relief in this revelation, but she would take what she could. “I just wish...”

She wished for so much that she didn’t even know where to begin.

The pain in her heart twisted and churned until it became something else. It transformed into frustration that she had ever let her hopes rise so high.

And with the frustration came anger.

“They lied to me. Whoever did this, they did it on purpose,” Rachel said through gritted teeth.

“They impersonated my father and used me to get to this ranch. I have to find out who did this.”

When her husband opened his mouth, she expected him to say she couldn’t do such a dangerous thing. To her surprise, Daniel nodded.

“They have to be stopped at once,” he declared. “We can find out who did this and stop them. I bet they are working with other people, too. We can set a trap and...”

As he went on about his plans, Rachel felt a knot form in her stomach. She usually liked when he spoke so animatedly about something. But this time it didn't feel right.

Her thoughts ran over the last hour. He had been so quick to redirect his anger from her onto someone else.

What did that say about the way he felt about her?

“Daniel.”

He stopped talking and their eyes met. Was this the man she had married? What did he see when he looked at her?

“I don’t want to. I haven’t forgiven you for what you just did. Outside, you were... You never apologized. You were ready to just let me leave,” she pointed out.

“You don’t trust me, do you? And you don’t love me.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. She couldn’t stop them. Through her watery gaze, she found her husband staring at in surprise.

It felt like he was stomping on the pieces of her heart that he had broken.

“You don’t love me,” she repeated. “Or else you wouldn’t have abandoned me.”

“Rachel.” He spoke her name softly. His hands slowly grew fainter on her shoulders and then he crept them up her neck.

It sent tingles up her spine though she tried to pretend it didn’t. He landed his hands on her face, cupping her cheeks.

“Rachel, Rachel, Rachel.”

He said her name so prettily. She didn’t want him doing that, she didn’t want to give in like he was trying to make her do.

Though she tried to wipe the tears off her face, she didn’t try to move his hands. The moment she moved her fingers from her face, Daniel leaned in and kissed her.

At first, she tried to twist away. But he gently bit her bottom lip. Her breath caught and she suddenly couldn’t move.

A shaky breath escaped her. Eyes closed, she felt him deepen the kiss and her knees grew weak.

“I want to help,” Daniel murmured through the kiss. “I want to fix this.”

The moan that escaped her lips next was answer enough for the two of them. Rachel was still upset with him, and angry that he thought a passionate kiss would fix everything.

It almost did, though she wished it wouldn’t. Her chest heaved as she panted for breath when he finally pulled away.

“Fine. Fine, you can help me,” she mumbled when he pressed his forehead to hers.

Perhaps she could still salvage her relationship and redeem herself once she had found the criminal. Wasn’t this what she wanted? It would certainly be easier with more help.

Daniel wanted to apologize to Rachel but he didn't know how.

He felt as though he would need to spend the rest of his life apologizing to Rachel. She deserved it. But first, he told himself, he needed to make things right.

"I have to tell Travis," he told Rachel. "He will understand that this was never your fault in the first place.

"It was all a mistake.. There was no way you could have known better. He'll understand."

Though he had hoped she was done crying, tears pooled in her gaze again. "How can you know that? He hates me, just like you did minutes ago."

Dropping his hands by his side, Daniel formed them tightly into fists.

He wasn't mad with her, but with himself. His wife had a point, after all. He had allowed himself to be played as a fool.

All that had done was tear the two of them apart. Hadn't he promised to do better for her? For the two of them?

He shook his head. "Either way, it won't matter. We will find out what is going on and we will put a stop to this one and for all."

There was still that hesitation in her eyes that set an ugly sensation

inside his gut. If only he had done something differently.

Why hadn't he believed her? They were meant to work together.

He would fix this.

When Rachel said nothing more, Daniel kissed her forehead and left her there, the letter in his hands.

He stalked down to the barn. There, he could hear his uncle talking to George and Bernard loudly and bitterly about how they could never trust women.

Especially on a ranch, where they were liable to do everything wrong.

"Uncle. I said it's time to stop," Daniel snapped when he entered the barn. "You only see what you want to see, don't you? Here."

He shoved the paper into the man's hands.

"As I have said over and over again, she is innocent. She was duped."

Travis scowled and read the letter.

Daniel looked over at the ranch hands, who shrugged. It was hard to tell if they were taking any of this seriously.

When Travis was done reading it, he scowled and, after scrunching the paper up into a ball, he tossed it over at Daniel unkindly.

"So? Just because her aunt says her father is dead doesn't mean she didn't know who the other person was."

"She didn't know," Daniel said in exasperation. What more did the old man need?

Scoffing, Travis crossed his arms and threw him a bitter look. "You can't prove what she does and doesn't know."

“You two don’t know each other well enough to know one way or the other. And even then, there are secrets!”

“She has apologized and tried hard to do the right thing. Every time! But that is never enough for you,” Daniel spat in irritation.

“When, huh? When will it be enough for you to accept her?”

His uncle had always been stern. He had even been bitter. But this felt like too much.

“I need proof. We all deserve that. Right now, she’s the one responsible for the thefts we’ve had here. It’s all that makes sense.

“I won’t change my mind until I have proof. You think she didn’t do it? Then bring me whoever did!”

Snatching up the crumpled letter so Rachel could have it back, Daniel left the barn with a scowl.

There was a restlessness in his blood that he couldn’t ignore. It drove him crazy that Travis had constantly viewed Rachel in a bad light.

It had been so bad that the man had tricked him to believe the same thing over and over. But his uncle couldn’t be right about everything.

He couldn't be right about Rachel.

Daniel told himself over and over again on the way back to the cottage that he was going to figure this out. They would catch the thieves and prove Travis wrong.

But how?

When he reached the cottage, he was relieved to find that Rachel had stopped packing.

The bag was still in the corner of the room on her side, and a few

items were still in there. But she had stopped and was currently sweeping the house.

She didn't answer when he gave her a nod.

Not knowing what to say to her now, Daniel put the letter back onto the writing desk and paused to think.

The plan he had first tossed around had been to write a letter back and try to trick the man. But they didn't have time for that nonsense.

They needed to do something now. They needed action.

Daniel swept out of the house without a word.

He had to think. Outside, he made his way down past the barn and roamed the fields slowly. Wasn't there something they could do? They had so many security measures in place.

It felt like they had done everything they could.

When he tried to talk to George about options, the man told him there was nothing more they could do.

"If your wife did it, then what else can we do?" he pointed out. "She's going to leave and then all of this will stop.

"That's what your uncle said, and we have to obey his rules. Besides, I can't think of anything else we can do to protect this ranch."

"So you won't do anything?" Daniel asked for clarification.

George answered with a hapless shrug.

This left Daniel struggling to decide what to do next. There would clearly be no help from the other men in this.

As for Rachel, he didn't want her to get hurt. He didn't want her to

help in case of that, and in case something went wrong so she could be blamed for the hundredth time.

An idea soon sprang to mind.

His parents used to have a little gray cat that would try to chase the animals around. But in order not to lose any animals, they had tied a bell around its neck.

They still had a couple of bells in the corner of the barn.

Daniel got to work. He collected all four bells and then wandered around again on the ranch to find the right place to put them.

They ended up on the padlocks for the gates as well as the barn.

This would have to do.

Although he stopped by the house to eat a lunch Rachel had prepared, Daniel soon went back outside. He wanted to keep an eye on everything.

Walking around with his gun at his hips, he waited.

It took another two days of him barely sleeping to be convinced back into bed.

“I don’t know what you’re doing,” Rachel told him, “but you are dead on your feet. I won’t leave in the middle of the night, I promise.

“You just need to get some sleep. Everyone is wondering what is going on with you.”

Daniel didn’t want to, but he finally conceded. He nodded and sighed before collapsing on his bed.

He hadn’t talked to her much after discovering that letter. Nor had he talked to the ranch hands or his uncle. He hadn’t even talked to

Adeline.

Instead, he was too busy watching over the ranch and constantly checking their security.

But she was right that he needed sleep.

Collapsing in the bed, he groaned as the feather mattress was almost too soft for him. It felt like a cloud.

His shoes were off, but he couldn't bring himself to finish undressing. He just closed his eyes.

Rachel tentatively joined him. He felt the bed move a little and then could smell her close to him. She wasn't touching him, but she was very near.

The last couple of days had been torture from him in trying to stay alert and watch for trouble while sorting through all of the emotional turmoil that was trapped within him.

Maybe, he supposed, he just needed some sleep for it all to go away.

He quickly drifted off.

He dreamed of laughter and smiles and happiness, something he craved terribly. It was a dream that he wanted to last forever.

Until, suddenly, someone was waking him up.

Rachel didn't know what to do with Daniel or with herself.

She laid in bed for hours, unable to sleep. It had been uncomfortable having this bed to herself for the last two nights.

Daniel hadn't joined her. He hadn't even retired. She had woken up a few times to find his figure moving about the ranch, looking for trouble.

This had meant he had fallen asleep a number of times during the day in the middle of his chores.

She had tried to help through a few of them, had made sure the sheep had water and checked the locks everywhere they went. It seemed like there was nothing more she could do but insist at last that he sleep for a night.

The circles under his eyes worried her.

Rachel tried so hard not to care. She was still so angry and hurt that Daniel kept changing his mind about everything. If anyone was flitty, it was him.

But she didn't want to speak ill of her husband, so she said nothing at all.

That night, she dropped into bed beside Daniel. It felt right, even if she wasn't in the best mood.

She listened to his heavy breathing; her husband had fallen asleep nearly before his head had even hit the pillow.

As for her, she tossed and turned. She hadn't been sleeping well either as she wondered what to do with herself.

Daniel seemed to have a plan of his own, one he hadn't mentioned to her. It made her feel useless as she went about her chores and avoided the gazes of the other men.

She closed her eyes and heard the tinkling of a bell.

That made no sense to her. Scrambling out of bed, she looked out the window and frowned. It took a minute to search through the darkness to see what was going on.

Was it Daniel's uncle? The ranch hands?

Her gaze fell upon the barn as it was opened up. A goat was led out by a dark figure and her stomach sank.

"Daniel!" She turned back to the bed and hurriedly shook him. "The thieves. They're here!"

It only took him a second. He frowned before widening his eyes. He clambered up and shoved on his shoes. "Get the guns! Now!"

Dawn was coming fast with the light about to creep over the horizon. It lightened the skies just enough that she managed to put on her own shoes and then obeyed his instructions by pulling out the guns he kept hidden while not in use.

"Stay here," he started to say.

"That's not happening," Rachel insisted and then went out the door before he could.

She had to prove herself, she knew. It was the only way for anyone on

the ranch to understand that she had been an innocent pawn in all of this trouble.

Clutching the gun with both hands, a gun similar to the weapon she'd borrowed that first time around, she aimed and struck dirt before the man with the goat.

The thief howled in surprise and let go of the rope. Unaffected, the goat trotted to a nearby patch of grass to start eating.

Rachel needed to move faster than that. She raced toward the man with her gun, but he quickly disappeared into the shadows beyond the barn.

Thinking quickly, she ran into the barn and made sure no other animals were missing.

They weren't.

But knowing she had to be fast, she ran into the stalls and grabbed Daisy. She used a simple rope bridle and the easiest saddle before galloping the horse out of there.

Her heart heaved. She was terrified, but she had to do this.

Finding the man again wasn't too hard since he had returned to the goats.

"Stop there!" she demanded and shot her gun again.

He cried out in pain before falling to the ground. "You shot me in the foot! You shot me in the foot!"

Hurrying over, she pointed her gun at him so he didn't try to get up. Now, he just rolled on the ground clutching his boot.

Blood and dirt spilled all over him.. She might have felt bad for him if he hadn't done so much to hurt her.

But there she was. She had the thief.

She could see from his face and hair that he was the same thief she had seen before. He was the one who had mentioned her father, though he clearly didn't know either the dead man or herself.

Another shout arose, and another shot. Though she wanted to look, she didn't. She breathed hard while she stared down the thief.

“Rachel? You can put your gun down now.”

Before she obeyed, she glanced back to find Daniel coming up toward her. He had a determined look on his face with rope in both hands.

She wavered only a moment before lowering her weapon.

He stopped before the thief. “You actually shot him?”

The incredulous look on his face made her blush. “Yes.”

Daniel's stern expression momentarily faded into a broad smile. “Well. You can shoot and ride now. I didn't know you would make such a perfect cowgirl.”

Forgetting she was angry, Rachel felt the blush grow even deeper. There was no need for her to feel so embarrassed and flattered at that moment.

She put the gun away and slid off her horse while she watched Daniel tie the man up.

Then it was time to take the man back to the barn. Daniel had pulled out a wagon onto which two other men were seated and tied.

Walking the horse back with them, Rachel glanced around in wonder.

“You don't know me,” she told the man who limped and groaned with every step, “but you have my letters. Don't you?”

The thief grunted. Daniel elbowed him just enough for him to fall over into the dust. She might have felt bad for the man if he hadn't caused so much harm.

Standing over him, she gave him her best glare. "Don't you?" she demanded.

Footsteps sounded nearby, but she paid them no mind as she concentrated on the thief. She didn't care about anything else in that moment. She wanted to get her name free.

But then a short whistle rang out.

She jerked her head up to see Travis, George, and Bernard all coming out. They had their guns in one hand and incredulous expressions on all of their faces.

Travis fixed it first to turn into a grimace.

"William Boyd, isn't it?" he growled. "I've seen his wanted posters around town. He's a horse thief and robber who's been everywhere. California, Colorado—everywhere."

William spat out dust as he sat himself up. "So what if I got those lousy letters? It's not my fault that girl is a fool.

"It was way too easy getting her to tell me everything about this ranch. We could finally eat what we wanted and sold most of them for easy money.

"I practically walked right in to take what I wanted!" he said with a cackle.

Taking a step back, Rachel felt ill. He was right. Perhaps she had at last been vindicated, but it didn't yet feel comforting.

Travis huffed. He yanked William up onto his feet and then shoved him into the wagon.

“Bernard, ride into town and take these scoundrels with you to the sheriff. I don’t want these men on this ranch for another minute.”

It wasn’t until Rachel watched the wagon reach the main road that the relief started to pour through her. A weight lifted off her shoulders.

She sighed and then glanced down at her hands.

The gun was put away and Daisy was put out to pasture so she could rest easy.

As for Rachel, she hardly knew what to think. She stepped out of the barn and found the other men glanced at each other and then back at her.

There were silent apologies in their eyes while they seemed to work on finding the right words to say.

“I’m sorry,” she said, breaking the silence. “I didn’t help the thieves. I didn’t want to lose the animals here. And I never planned on leaving.

“But... I should have been more responsible. I trusted letters that I shouldn’t have. I knew in my gut that they didn’t sound right, but I just...”

Tears blurred her vision. “I was so desperate for a family. I wanted so badly to believe someone cared.”

“Rachel...” Daniel sighed and started over to her. He took her hand and patted it gently. “I’m so sorry.”

A gruff voice soon followed, one that Rachel hadn’t expected.

“You were naive, Rachel, but you have nothing to apologize for. What you did was wrong but I suppose you meant well with it.

“Everyone wants a family, I think,” Travis added slowly. He grimaced and then shook his head. “Maybe if I had tried more, then we might

have turned out okay.

“I should have tried to be family instead of an enemy. I think I’m the one who has to apologize here.”

Never before had Travis said so much to her.

Rachel felt overwhelmed with what he had just told her. But she was so grateful that he’d said it. The man made his apologies slowly and clearly.

When he was done, she nodded. “Thank you. And you’re forgiven.”

His shoulders relaxed and she was glad of that. There had been too much anger on the ranch since she had arrived. But now, suddenly, everything felt right.

It brought her peace knowing that they might actually be able to move beyond all this trouble someday.

“Seek my advice next time you are worried and doubt yourself,” Travis told her. “And I’ll do my best to help.

“I wanted to be a father to Daniel and I want to be a father to you. If you’ll let me, I’ll work harder at it.”

The tears wouldn’t stop. Rachel nodded and wrapped an arm around him.

It was their first embrace, and she prayed it would not be their last.

“Thank you,” she murmured in a whisper.

Daniel could hardly believe it was over.

Having expected cheerful warmth and relief to pour through him, he was disappointed to find how alone and chilled he felt over the entire experience.

There was no time to just sit around and stop working, so the men had returned to their duties. A ranch didn't take breaks or vacations.

And he had a long list of chores to attend to just like everyone else.

Shaking his head, Daniel rode his horse through the fields in an attempt to clear his mind. The cattle were being moved to the north pasture since there was more overgrowth than usual.

It was where the first of the cattle had been stolen from them, so they had avoided letting the animals graze for very long.

But that was all over now, a worry he no longer needed to concern himself with.

George had returned with the wagon and not with the men. The sheriff had been all too glad to have the incapacitated thieves on hand.

One had a hole in his foot from Rachel's gun. Another had broken his hand after falling off a fence where he was trying to pull up two sheep when Daniel had stopped him.

The other one was roughed up when he didn't want to go down, but he had also been handled like the rest.

And now, the ranch was safe.

Everything was well again, but nothing felt right. His stomach churned as he tried to figure out what it might be.

It was a glance at the cottage that reminded him it was about a person and not the problem.

Rachel.

His mouth grew dry as he thought of his treatment of her lately. He had not been a fair and kind husband like he had always expected himself to be.

What had he been thinking? Even when he had the proof that she was innocent, he still hadn't been his best self for her. He had been too focused on saving the ranch.

Had he always put the ranch before her?

A frown made its way onto his face. He stopped the horse to grab his canteen and drink.

He thought over the first letters he had exchanged with Rachel. Part of him had felt certain he loved her before he had ever laid eyes on her.

Upon her arrival, he had thought her more beautiful than expected.

Even though she hadn't known about how to manage her chores or live on a ranch, he had tried to fix that and teach her. She had learned quickly and asked questions and clearly wanted to do better.

He thought of how well she had learned to cook for all of them. No matter what had come her way, she had always tried to do better.

She had taken care of him with that massage. She hadn't lost an egg in days. And when she realized her mistake with the letters, she apologized.

She had even accepted his uncle's apology without hesitation.

The more he thought about his wife, the more thunderstruck he felt that she had bothered to stay when he clearly didn't deserve her.

That had to be why he felt so terrible.

His stomach continued churning. He grimaced, shaking his head. He should have known better from the very beginning.

So much of this was his fault. And when was the last time he had apologized?

Suddenly remembering how she was still mad at him upon finding the letter, how hurt she had been, he wondered if the kiss had been enough of an apology.

It had felt right at the time. He had wanted her to know that he still cared. But now, after actually considering the entire situation, he realized this wasn't enough for her.

Rachel deserved more.

Daniel turned his horse back toward the barn. He had procrastinated enough. He needed to step up and be a worthy husband.

If he didn't fix this now, when would he?

Reaching the barn, he came upon his uncle, who was oiling leather. The man seemed more relaxed than he had been that morning and for weeks before.

Looking up, his uncle gave him a nod. "How is that field?" Travis asked.

“It looks fine, but I’m taking the rest of the day off,” Daniel announced.

No one did that on a ranch. Especially not here, so he expected his uncle to speak up and berate him. He slid down off his horse and waited.

“Good,” Travis said after a long minute. “You deserve it.”

It was a day full of surprises. Daniel blinked twice before nodding and hurrying off.

He supposed he should probably take this opportunity while he still could, in case his uncle changed his mind.

He put his horse away and then hastened toward the house. Though he meant to go straight to the cottage, he diverted.

Adeline jumped when the back door banged open. She raised her eyebrow at him.

“I need a basket,” he proclaimed. “And food. Quickly.”

The two of them worked together for several minutes; she had to keep slapping his hands away because he kept doing everything wrong.

At last, a basket filled with food was in his hands. He practically ran to the cottage to retrieve his wife.

“Rachel?” he called upon stepping inside. “Rachel, I’m taking you out.”

She jerked up from the sofa where she had a pile of clothes set beside her. She had moved the sewing machine over and appeared to be hemming some more clothing items.

Turning to him, she frowned in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, we’re celebrating. Come on. I’ll explain later. Please?” he added when she did nothing.

Rachel glanced dubiously down at the cloth in her hands before slowly nodding. She rose to her feet and came over to him.

Though he had hoped she might be a little more thrilled about this, he supposed he had to mend their problems first.

So, he tried to do that. Daniel took her hand once she was close to him. They left the cottage and he started walking down the path.

At first, she said nothing, her eyes wide and darting around the entire time.

“Where are we going?” she asked after a minute.

“Where else?”

He turned to give her a smile just as they arrived at where they had last eaten outside together. The sun was shining above them and the nearby trees offered some cool breezes that now fluttered through Rahel’s hair.

After hesitating, she nodded and then sat down near the trunk of a tree. He quickly joined and set the basket that had been in his free hand onto the ground.

Her hand started toward the lid of the basket but he stopped her by clearing his throat. She must have been hungry since they hadn’t eaten yet.

He had forgotten about that. But not his stomach grumbled and he remembered.

He would have to do this quickly.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel burst out.

Freezing, Rachel looked up at him in bewilderment.

Her mouth dropped open and then she closed it. Her hands went back into her lap and she waited for him to continue.

Daniel's throat constricted even though he knew he needed to do this. Not for him, but for her.

"I'm sorry," he repeated and then hurriedly went into detail. "I should have always believed you. I should have trusted you enough so that you could trust me.

"That's what married couples are meant to do. I shouldn't have doubted or suspected or accused you about anything. I should have listened to you more.

"I'm so sorry, Rachel," he finished. "I want to be the best husband for you, moving forward. Please, let me prove that to you."

Emotion warred across her face.

She bit her lip and then stopped to bite the inside of her cheek. Keeping her gaze on him, she seemed to struggle with what she was thinking or feeling.

"Thank you," she responded at last. Her voice wavered. "I want to trust you, Daniel."

Scooting forward, he took his hand in hers. "I'm going to make sure that you can for the rest of your life. I'm going to do better.

"I'll stand by your side for the rest of our lives, even with the odds stacked up against you. I will do better just for you."

A warm flush started to creep up her face. He scooted a little closer so that their knees were touching.

They were so very close now. He could smell her sweet scent and

prayed she would believe him.

“I love you,” Daniel told her.

That seemed to draw Rachel in. Her eyes widened. They hadn’t said this to one another much. That was one of the many things that he wanted to change just for her.

Catching her eye, he watched his wife’s face slowly relax. She let out a sigh and then nodded before putting out a hand to touch his cheek. “Thank you, Daniel. I love you, too.”

His heart soared to hear her say those words to him now. Nothing could be better than this moment with her.

Reaching out, he crept his hands up her arm before reaching her neck. He could hear her breathing hitch, so he kept moving, a smile slowly climbing over his lips.

There was no need for them to stress or worry now. All of their problems were gone.

It was just the two of them. Daniel revelled in the feeling of loving his wife. He wanted to be with her no matter what for the rest of their lives.

Relaxing, he inhaled deeply and leaned over to kiss Rachel. He wanted to kiss his wife, to melt into her and forget everything.

So, that was what they did. They kissed, enjoying their picnic however they liked. No one else was around to stop them.

It was an incredible feeling. The rest of their day was relaxing and joyful and perfect.

It was paradise to him. Daniel held his wife in his hands as he prayed to God that he would always do better for her than he had done before.

They had a long life together before them and he wanted it to be perfect for her. He promised silently that he would find a way to make things right for Rachel.

Epilogue

Rachel glanced down, alarm filling her body.

Gasping, she hastily looked around the small cottage. Had she lost them? She couldn't think of where else they might have gone.

She had been sleeping for just a minute. All she had done was set her head down on the pillow. It couldn't have been for more than a moment.

Maybe an hour? She didn't know.

Hastily scurrying around the room, she felt her heart pound in her chest. She was exhausted and drained, more than she had ever thought possible.

After the last year or so of living on this ranch, she had expected to settle in and live simply. But that seemed not to be the case.

Just as her hand landed on the doorknob of her bedroom, she heard laughter ring out. She inhaled deeply and swung the door open.

The bedroom was left behind her as she ran past the sofa and the small kitchen to find the front door open.

Praying that all was well, Rachel made it to the door.

And then she immediately relaxed to find that all *was* well. She had been worried for nothing. Her heart pounded noisily in her chest as she leaned against the door.

What had she been thinking? Of course, all was well. She was a fool to think otherwise.

There was no danger on this ranch and hardly any trouble. The worst of it had been in not having as many animals as they'd needed before.

It had made the winter a little difficult for them in the beginning. But by then, Rachel had grown used to the ways of the ranch.

She knew how to ride and to shoot and to lasso. She had worked with some of the cattle and now typically managed most of the other creatures on the ranch.

There wasn't a single chore she hadn't tried for herself at this point.

Not that she did all of them. It had become difficult with her growing belly during the harvest.

She hadn't been able to kneel down and garden like she would have preferred, and a few other chores had to be moved onto someone else's plate.

Fortunately, no one had grumbled at that.

In fact, she'd needed to fight for the right to keep working at all. Everyone had been so worried about her working on the ranch while carrying a child.

Upon finding herself pregnant only a short while into the early harvest, she had shared the hopeful news without expecting everyone to start treating her like she was glass.

But the pregnancy had gone well, for the most part. The midwife had assured her that by getting so much fresh air, she was due to have a very healthy child.

Well, healthy children.

Sighing, Rachel looked out to see Travis just a few yards ahead in the shade of the apple blossom tree. The man appeared much happier than she had ever seen him before.

It was probably best explained by the two bundles in his arms.

She relaxed against the door and crossed her arms with a shake of her head. She should have known he would have them.

Right now, the man was singing a nonsensical song to the children. He had mixed it in with a hymn, thanking the Lord for his children.

He was the grandfather he had longed to be after all these years.

A smile climbed up to her face.

Unable to help herself, she chuckled. It was quite a sight to see. Had this happened a year ago, she would have never believed it possible.

The last year truly had been a learning experience for them all. Rachel still grew confused sometimes over how much had been able to change for everyone on the ranch.

They'd all grown in such extraordinary ways.

Her uncle, for example, for she called him that now. Uncle Travis had softened into a good man who knew clever jokes and taught her valuable life lessons.

He had helped to grow the garden and was the one to teach her how to lasso. Even Daniel frequently marveled over how much the man had changed.

Rachel just hoped it meant he truly was happy.

And it certainly seemed that the twins did the trick for him.

"You said you believe you're only five months along?" the midwife had asked during one of her visits. "Dear, you look closer to eight.

"I'd be careful, mind you. There could be a couple tykes in there."

Daniel had laughed off the idea at first. He had shaken his head and then looked at Rachel lovingly.

Taking her hand, he had kissed it. “If it’s a boy, we should name him after your father.”

“What about your father?” she had asked.

They debated through the rest of the pregnancy about what to name their child. She couldn’t have been more than seven and a half months pregnant when the labor started.

No longer allowed to do anything other than cook light meals, she had needed to waddle to the front door to ring a loud cowbell that they’d put in place for just this reason.

Bernard had immediately taken off toward town while Daniel had rushed to her side.

It had been a hard delivery. Rachel wasn’t a fool about that. The experience had been much harder than she had imagined.

She had cried and screamed and experienced pain in a way she hadn’t known was possible. And the fear.

“What if it’s too soon?” she remembered sobbing to Daniel. “I don’t want to lose them.”

He had hugged her tight. Almost too tight, but she had needed it. He seemed to always know what she needed before she did.

“We will get through this, Rachel. You’re the strongest person I know. I’m here for you. I love you. We will trust in the Lord and you will get through this.”

Those words were what had kept her going.

She had pushed and passed out toward the end, not remembering

much after that until there were suddenly little things put up into her arms. When she had peeked a watery eye open, she had found two red little figures curled up beside her.

“Two boys,” Daniel had whispered. “Steven and Quinton it is.”

There were times she still cried over how happy having these boys had made her. They brought her so much joy that she hadn’t imagined was possible.

Sometimes she nearly felt guilty for having so much cheer in her heart.

Even with the twins only a few months old, Rachel couldn’t imagine a life without them. She leaned her head on the door while she watched Travis with the children.

“You were sleeping so well that I couldn’t bring myself to wake you.”

She turned slightly to see Daniel walking toward her. He gave a sheepish smile as he wiped his dirty hands on his pants.

From the look of it, he had been tending to the garden for her.

“I still need to carry my weight around here, don’t I?” she asked.

That had been driven into her upon her arrival. In the back of her mind, it continued to push her forward.

Not only did she want to do her part, she enjoyed the work now. She was proud of the ranch and how well it functioned.

“You do,” Daniel assured her as he came over to slip his arms around her waist. Tugging her close, he stood behind her to watch his uncle with the babies as well.

A sigh escaped his lips. “With the twins, you’ve done more than enough.”

Giggling, she rolled her eyes. "I can do more than just birth children."

He leaned down to kiss her neck, making her inhale sharply. "I know. But they're a lot of work and you need your rest. Remember what the midwife said?

"Mothers often need to rest up for several months until they're at their full strength. You're already doing so much.

"When Quin started to wake, I came in and brought them out so you could keep sleeping."

Her husband was much too good to her.

Rachel shook her head and then leaned back. The man was warm, heating her up enough to make her flush.

They had been married over a year now, but she doubted she would ever stop blushing when they touched one another.

It was a good thing, she supposed, that he liked that about her so much.

And he clearly liked everything else about her, just like she liked everything about him.

There had been none of those squabbles they'd had back when the thieving was going on. They told each other everything and carried no secrets.

"How are the flowers?" Rachel asked.

He kissed her head and then moved to lead her to the garden. She clung to him, craving his touch as though she hadn't seen him just before putting the children down to nap.

The two of them left the children with their grandfather to make their way over to the garden. One side was meant for the vegetables and

now one side was dedicated to flowers.

A sweet smell drifted on the wind.

The smile wouldn't come off her face if she tried. Letting Daniel guide her around, she wondered how happy she was and if it was possible to be any happier.

She didn't think so.

After all, she had her family. She remembered her earlier dream of having two boys and two girls with Daniel.

Part of her hoped still for those daughters, but she was also content with everything else that she had in the moment. Her hopes and her dreams had been actualized in a way she had always wanted.

She just wished her mother and father could be there to see how happy she was.

Listening to her husband talk about the garden, Rachel clung to his arm with both of her hands. She thought of the letters she received on a regular basis and how happy they made her.

Charlotte was married to Eric now after having a Christmas wedding. They were happy and even expecting.

She talked about New York and said that they were thinking about leaving the city to a smaller town. Maybe, they would even stop by Texas someday.

Rachel's aunt was doing well also, though growing older every day. The mail problem had finally been sorted out after all that time.

And now there were also letters from Adeline. She had left her post just before the harvest, since she had found the man she wished to marry through their correspondence.

It warmed Rachel's heart every day to know the woman was happily married, just like Adeline had always wanted.

"Well?" Daniel asked her hopefully. "I didn't mess anything up, did I?"

She giggled and shook her head. "Of course not. All of this looks so perfect."

Peering up at his face, the wrinkles in his brow faded away. She smoothed her own expression and then gave him a small sigh.

"All of this is so perfect."

What more could she want? Her parents might have been gone, but now she had another family who loved her and cared for her.

She had a beautiful home with a sturdy ranch where she had all the fresh air she could ever want. And beyond that, there was happiness around every corner.

Daniel looked at her for a long minute before smiling at her. "I love you. Did I tell you that today?"

He had. He had been watching her when she woke up, playing with one of her curls gently, so as to not be the reason she awoke.

Daniel had proceeded to cover her in delicate kisses while telling her how much he loved her. She hadn't known she could be so adored.

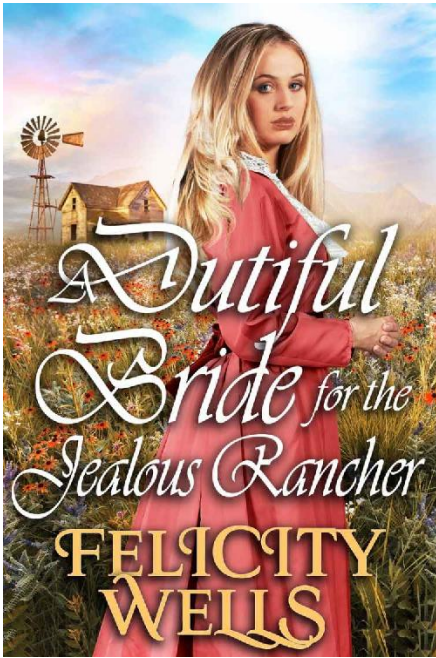
"Maybe," she told him playfully. "But you should probably say it again so I don't forget."

Her husband wrapped his arms around her to pull her close. She stumbled in the dirt but he kept her upright. His lips pressed against her lips, sending tingles up her spine.

He smelled like horses and fresh dirt. Relaxing against him, Rachel slowly wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I love you,” he whispered to her. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

A Dutiful Bride for the Jealous Rancher



Chapter 1

Cynthia Rollins took a deep breath and let it out slowly, lacing up her nicest shoes and getting herself ready.

The shoes were snug, but Cynthia was tall for her thirteen years and her feet had grown in proportion. There wasn't money for a new pair any time soon; it was simply something she would have to accept.

She missed her father, with his bright, blue eyes that she had inherited from him, along with the dark brown hair. He had told her just a few weeks ago that he would make an effort to get her some new clothing that would fit her better, now that she was growing into a young woman.

Cynthia had smiled, proud that her father viewed her in such a way. She really did try to be just that, to make him happy.

But that was before they knew his heart was struggling to make it through each day.

That was before they were aware of the fact that he was just days from clutching his chest and letting out a cry of pain, sweat covering his brow, and a final gasp warning them that everything about their family was about to change.

Since then, Linda May had worn her black grief in the form of a widow's veil. She looked at her son, Nathan—just five years of age, the child of Linda's first husband—with love and adoration.

Then, she would glance at Cynthia with the face of obligation, of exhaustion.

In just two weeks, Cynthia had gone from a beloved daughter to the child in the way, the burden.

And when Linda May came out from helping Nathan get dressed, she looked at Cynthia with pursed lips and that *what to do with you?* expression she had been wearing all the time lately.

“Oh, there you are. You’re ready?” Linda May asked, adjusting her fine hat with the black mesh falling over her face in a cascade, while looking in the mirror she kept near the door.

Although their family had never been wealthy, they could afford to have a few nice things, and this mirror was rather ornately framed compared to some of the other things around the small home.

“I am. Are we going to the bakery?” Cynthia asked in reply. She loved any chance she had to go out and enjoy the day.

Being stuck at home was always difficult and since the death of her father, she had barely been allowed to leave for any reason. All she wanted was a chance to go out and try to forget the weight on her shoulders.

But Linda May simply sighed deeply and turned to her, those lips pursing again as she continued tucking her blonde locks under the brim of the hat. Her face was oddly youthful in comparison to the thin, crepe-like skin of her hands.

“Nathan and I are going to the bakery. You will not be joining us. I can’t watch the both of you,” she said with that faint hint of Irish brogue Cynthia had grown accustomed to.

Linda May’s mother and father had come to America before she was even born. Still, Linda May had retained hints of the accent used in her home growing up—quite different from Cynthia’s father, whose

family had been ranchers out west.

“I can help you with Nathan. You won’t have to watch me at all. I’ll be your helper, not a hindrance,” Cynthia said, tilting her youthful face to look up at Linda May with hope.

She didn’t want to be left behind or ignored. Aside from Nathan and Linda May, she had no real family left.

“You won’t do any such thing. I already told you that you need to stay with Miss Beattie. She’s the one who’s going to look after you,” Linda May said.

“But Miss Beattie must be busy with other things. Shouldn’t you just take me with you so I can look after Nathan? It’s no trouble. I’ll be good and I’ll be helpful,” Cynthia insisted.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Linda May demanded, her tone harsh and full of frustration. “I already told you that you’re to stay with Joyce.

“I don’t need you coming with us and getting in the way. I know that your father...”

Linda May stopped and took a deep breath to calm herself. Cynthia read it in the woman’s face: she wished Cynthia wasn’t there, that she would just go away and not bother them anymore.

Cynthia, however, couldn’t help that she was around. She hadn’t asked for this, either. She didn’t want to be with Linda May.

Sure, Nathan was a nice little boy, but he wasn’t her brother, and Linda May didn’t really let Cynthia spend much time with him, anyway.

There was no reason to fight for Linda May’s approval when Cynthia already knew she wouldn’t get it. More than likely, it would only make things worse, would drive a further wedge between them.

For as long as Linda May had been married to her father, Cynthia had felt that it would have been better if she wasn't around them.

Linda May had made it painfully clear that she wanted a husband who didn't have the burden of a child, but it was too late.

Cynthia's father had never heard any of the rude remarks or seen the grimaces.

"I'm sorry," Cynthia apologized in a small voice. She didn't know what else to say.

Linda May was always angry at her, and the last thing she wanted was to make things harder for the woman who was going to look after her from then on.

"Yes, well, I suppose we are all very sorry. But it's too late to change things now, Cynthia. We just need to move forward, you know. We need to make do with what we can.

"Your father is gone, but we're all still here and there's no reason to get emotional about it," Linda May said. She was very stiff and Cynthia wished Linda May would be warmer, more like Miss Beattie.

Cynthia remained quiet, letting Linda May make the decisions moving on. When Nathan followed his mother out the door, Cynthia trailed behind them and they made their way to Miss Beattie's home next door.

Linda May was acting rather jumpy the entire time and Cynthia couldn't understand why she was being so odd. She wished Linda May would just be calm and patient, but she was always strange and even more anxious now than ever.

It must have been because she was so shaken by the death of Cynthia's father.

That made sense. It was the only reason why she would have had a

reason for acting this way, Cynthia imagined.

Everyone missed him and it was only normal his absence should leave everyone shaken and lost.

They reached Miss Beattie's home and Linda May knocked on the aged, wooden door. Miss Beattie opened it, appearing confused for a long moment until she took in the sight of Cynthia standing there, a sad expression on her face.

"Ah, I see," Miss Beattie said, her tone not exactly friendly. She looked up at Linda May and her eyes narrowed just slightly enough to pretend politeness.

Cynthia realized that it was for her sake. Miss Beattie had always been kind to her; it was Linda May she hadn't ever seemed to care for.

"I need to go into town with Nathan," Linda May said, somewhat nervously, an awkward smile spreading across her face with frantic eyes in contrast.

"I'm sure you do. And I take it you would like me to look after Cynthia?"

"If you wouldn't mind," Linda May answered.

Miss Beattie looked at Cynthia with compassion in her eyes and then back up to Linda May. It was barely a blink that flashed from that compassion to coldness.

"You know, the girl would probably love a chance to get into town. I'm sure being stuck with someone like me will be terribly boring for her," Miss Beattie said.

"No, no, not at all! You are a young woman and, therefore, much more exciting than I am. And you're a good role model for Cynthia.

"You know, she's a good girl and she will grow up to be an excellent

woman, but having someone like you around is only going to help matters,” Linda May said, clearly panicked.

“Maybe she needs someone in her life who will act like a mother,” Miss Beattie retorted.

“Well, as you know, I am making every effort to stand in that role, and I have for the past few years. But is it not also true that a child should have many people in her life to help her as she grows?

“I’d like to know that you’re here, able to assist me in looking after her as a friend and companion at times,” Linda May said.

“Don’t you really mean you want her to come spend as much time here as possible so you don’t have to deal with watching a child who isn’t yours?” Miss Beattie challenged her.

It hurt Cynthia to hear those words, even though she knew they were true. No matter how many times she heard something like that, it was still just as painful as the first time.

It wasn’t as if she wanted to be an inconvenience to Linda May. She hadn’t asked her father to pass away. But Miss Beattie was pointing out a very true thing, no matter how unfortunate it was.

Even if Cynthia had tried to ignore it for the past few years, it had always been true. Linda May had never taken her anywhere unless Cynthia’s father made her, asking her to do this for him.

Linda May had never wanted to, always offering an excuse as to why it wasn’t a good idea, why Cynthia shouldn’t be allowed to join her for whatever event it might be, even just going to buy flour from the general store.

“Regardless of what you want or don’t want, yes. I will look after Cynthia while you are out.

“But I expect you to think long and hard about what it means to look

after her now that Mr. Rollins has passed away,” Miss Beattie said.

Linda May grimaced and nodded, a contradiction in gestures to make Miss Beattie think she would do something she would never do.

Miss Beattie shook her head, clearly smart enough to know better. Cynthia looked at the floor, too embarrassed to acknowledge this charity.

“Well, thank you for looking after her for now. She’s had her breakfast, but may need lunch, depending on how long we are out for,” Linda May said.

“All right, that’s not a problem. I’ll get her fed. David is playing in the back and he’ll certainly want to play with Cynthia,” Miss Beattie said.

“Thank you, Joyce,” Linda May said at last, before turning away. Suddenly, she stopped and looked back at Cynthia.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. At last, she gave an uncomfortable, somewhat apologetic smile before turning once more and walking away.

“That woman,” Miss Beattie muttered, shaking her head. Cynthia glanced up and saw the frustration in Miss Beattie’s eyes.

“I know she doesn’t like taking me places,” Cynthia said as they stood there, watching Linda May walk away, Nathan silently plodding along beside her.

“She doesn’t know what she wants. That’s the problem with Linda May. She’s as unpleasant as they come. Your father deserved better,” Miss Beattie said.

“You think so?” Cynthia asked.

“I do. And you deserve better, as well,” she added.

“I don’t know about that. My mother and father both died and Linda May can’t spend much time around me. I don’t know how I could deserve anything better,” Cynthia said.

“That’s nonsense. You’ll be alright, Cynthia. Besides, look at how she’s running off! You might get lucky,” Miss Beattie said.

“What do you mean?” Cynthia asked.

“Look at her,” Miss Beattie said. “Is that woman even planning to come back for you?”

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